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focus:
FAMINE

Refugees

UNHCR
United Nations
High Commissioner
for Refugees

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Famine

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Cover Photo: Somali refugees at Ifo camp in Kenya, ward for malnourished children. UNHCR/P. Moumtzis

Famine

THE PARCHED EARTH:

Drought in southern Africa

The worst drought in living memory is tightening its grip on southern Africa, shrivelling cereal harvests in the region's breadbaskets and threatening hunger for millions of people across 11 countries.

For the first time this century, none of the food-exporting countries in the region is able to export grain to its neighbors. The aggregate cereal production has fallen to about half of the normal production. Food on an unprecedented scale must be brought into the region. Including commercial imports by South Africa, the region will have to import 11.5 million tons of food this year, compared to about 2 million in a normal year.

Only a massive international relief effort will avert widespread food shortages and a famine later in the year, according to a joint assessment by the United Nations World Food Program and the Food and Agriculture Organization.

The rainy season was normal and crops looked good until January 1991. Then, at the crucial pollination stage, the rains ceased, except in Angola. It rained a little in March, too late to save crops and barely enough for the pastures. Today, parched corn fields, empty lakes and reservoirs, dead livestock, food lines in the cities and hungry peasants searching for food and water can be seen throughout the most affected countries.

HALF THE NEEDS PLEDGED

At a donors conference held in Geneva on 1 June, the Southern Africa Development Coordinating Conference (SADCC) appealed for help to cover the minimum survival needs of the 18 million most vulnerable people affected by the drought. Eighty per cent of the appeal is for food aid; water schemes, essential drugs, seeds, tools, livestock protection activities and funds for logistics assistance are also included.

The World Food Program (WFP), the food aid organization of the United Nations, appealed for 1,645,000 metric tons of emergency food aid, valued at $685 million. Half of the amount was pledged. This food will go to vulnerable groups, and the poorest people badly affected by the drought.

READEX
FICHE

who do not have the purchasing power to buy on the market. Most of it will be channelled through vulnerable group feeding programs already implemented by WFP, by NGOs and the various governments of the countries of the region.

In addition, it is estimated that 10 countries of the drought-affected region — Angola, Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, Swaziland, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe — will require 2.5 million tons of program food aid to be sold through local markets.

On the side of commercial imports, South Africa alone will need to import an unprecedented level of 5.5 million tons of maize and wheat. South Africa can afford to pay for its needs, but most of the other southern African states face severe foreign exchange shortages and may only be able to pay for a third of the shortfall.

Although a severe food availability crunch is not expected until August or September, when carryover stocks will be consumed, alarming reports of acute shortages are coming in.

The drought also means that supplies of cereals and other food, normally purchased in the region by WFP and other donors for refugee feeding programs, are no longer available.

DROUGHT AND WAR

Hardest hit is Mozambique, where drought has compounded the effects of years of civil war. Mozambique has the world's highest child mortality rate. One-third of the population — about 4 million people — are displaced. The loss of crops and livestock, lack of water and a cholera epidemic have resulted in mass movements of people looking for food and water. In Inhambane province, women must walk for a whole day to the only remaining water source. Deaths from starvation and thirst have been reported in the southern and central regions, where there was an almost total cereal crop failure. Around 3 million people are in need of emergency relief.

Of the 18 million people at risk from the drought, about 2 million are refugees. A million and a half Mozambican refugees in Malawi, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe are completely dependent on food aid channelled through UNHCR. In Malawi's Lower Shire, which hosts the largest concentration — 1 million — of Mozambican refugees, farmers harvested practically no cereals at all.

Many of the 250,000 Angolan refugees in neighboring countries are farmers and their prospects are bleak. Although Angola itself is not suffering much from drought, the repatriation and resettlement of returnees may be delayed because drought-hit Zimbabwe cannot supply seeds for the returnees, as it had offered to do through WFP.

The drought also means that supplies of cereals and other food, normally purchased in the region by WFP and other donors for refugee feeding programs, are no longer available. Zimbabwe, for example, usually had a surplus of high-quality maize that could be trucked or railed to neighboring countries. In 1990, WFP bought in Zimbabwe 123,000 tons of maize, maize meal and other food worth $18.7 million for its emergency operations in Mozambique and for refugees in Malawi. Now it will have to bring

food for refugees from overseas at a much higher cost.

NO FOOD, NO WATER

Not only in Zimbabwe but throughout the region, maize, the staple food, withered on the stalk. In the most affected countries, estimated losses, by percentage of normal yield, are appalling: Lesotho, 70 per cent; Malawi, 40 per cent; Namibia, 80-90 per cent; South Africa, 66 per cent; Swaziland, 80-90 per cent; Zambia, 66 per cent; and Zimbabwe, 90 per cent.

The region also faces acute water shortages, both for humans and animals. Thousands of cattle have died following the drying up of wells, pans and other surface catchments. Boreholes are also steadily drying up.

Water shortages are likely to increase mortality and morbidity, with outbreaks of diarrhea, cholera, meningitis, conjunctivitis and skin infections such as scabies.

The water level of large dams such as the Kariba in Zambia has dropped sharply. As this affects the electricity supply, major cities in Zambia and Zimbabwe have power cuts. The water-dependent textile and sugar industries are closing down, particularly in hard-hit Bulawayo, the industrial heart of Zimbabwe.

The drought could not have come at a worse time. Political and economic reforms taking place in many of these countries may suffer as funds are channelled into relief and other measures to offset the impact of the drought. The political temperature may soar if discontented people take to the streets.

MOVING THE FOOD

The logistics of bringing such an enormous amount of food and other aid to the region is daunting. Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Swaziland, Zambia and Zimbabwe are landlocked. The ports and transportation systems of Mozambique and Angola, ravaged by more than a decade of civil war, need urgent repair. Facilities in South Africa, though good, are geared towards exports and risk being clogged by the huge volume of imports. In addition to their own imports, the ports of Namibia, South Africa, Mozambique and Tanzania will have to handle the food coming in for other countries.

In its role as overall logistics coordinator and clearing house for all food deliveries, WFP is setting up a Regional Logistics Advisory Center in Harare, jointly with the Southern Africa Development Coordinating Conference (SADCC). It will also place logistics officers at various strategic locations in the region.

Backed up by WFP headquarters in Rome, the Harare Center will collect and provide information on food pledges in relation to overall requirements; on shipping schedules, port and corridor status, and on actual food shipments, deliveries and distribution. It will also issue a weekly telex with this information to donors and others active in the relief operation.

Earlier this year, when the magnitude of the drought became apparent, WFP moved quickly to bring in emergency food supplies for the people in direst need or in the hardest-to-reach places, before the huge quantities needed to respond to the drought start arriving.

WFP called forward some 180,000 tons of maize donated by the EC and the U.S. for Mozambican refugees in Malawi and for displaced Mozambicans in their own country. This food is now arriving in Mozambique.

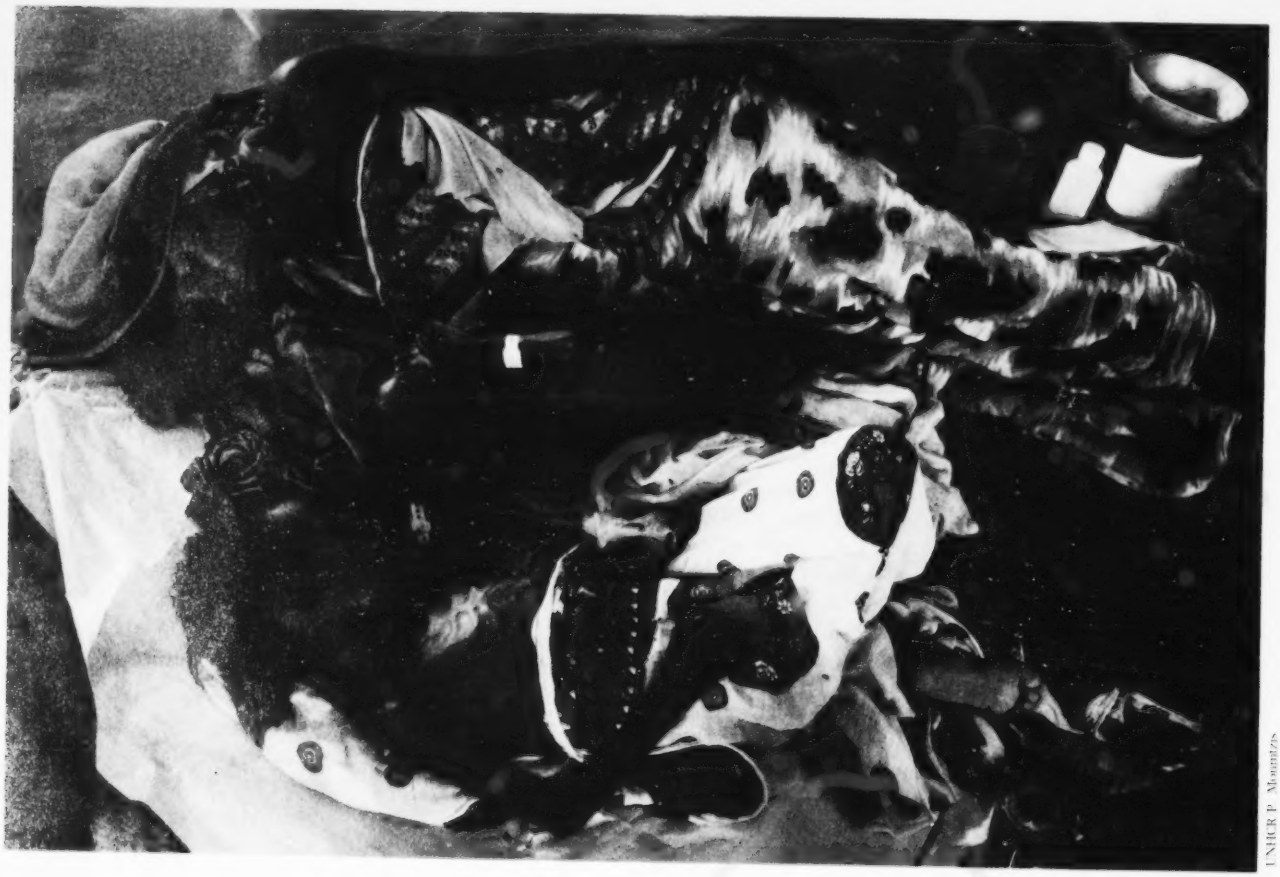
In addition, 45,000 tons of maize, donated by the U.S. to Malawi via WFP, arrived in Durban on 22 May and were taken by rail to Harare. The first truck convoy, carrying 2,000 tons, left Harare in early June for Blantyre, Malawi, thus beginning a huge and complex operation on a scale never before attempted in southern Africa.

MERCEDES SAYAGUES
World Food Program

KENYA:
Hunger everywhere

A refugee camp is a reproduction in miniature of society itself. All sorts of people can be found there: thieves who can forge a ration book in the twinkling of an eye; shopkeepers who magically produce cigarettes and Pepsi Cola in the depths of the bush; leaders, strong-willed persons who are used to giving orders; and, finally, the great majority — those who keep silent, those who suffer, including women and, right at the bottom of the scale, children. During the conflicts and tragic events which incite populations to leave their own countries, children are often the first to die. They are too young for the long, exhausting trek, too weak to speak out when there is nothing left to eat, too deprived; they fall victim to the slightest virus.

With this in mind, I went to Kenya



Children are often the first to die among arrivals

UNHCR P. Montalto

to see what was happening, to try to understand, to tell people about the situation.

In New York or Geneva, the refugee question appears quite straightforward; figures are cited and the string of zeros attached to them is difficult to grasp. But thousands of miles away, on the frontiers of countries no longer under control, emotion seizes you by the throat and the magnitude of the suffering makes you want to scream.

RICH AND POOR

In Kenya, there are 250,000 refugees from Sudan, Ethiopia and Somalia, and more arrive every day. Nomads, farmers, officials, businessmen, city-dwellers and country people, rich or poor, they are all in the same situation.

In the camp at Walda, in the north, there are thousands of Ethiopians, driven from their homes by war or famine. They are weak and racked by fever. The children are in an alarming state. In many camps, it is usually easy to recognize the orphans and the children separated from their parents by war; they come and rub themselves up against you like kittens. They take your hand shyly and implore you in silence: "I am all alone. Please love me."

But at Walda, you do not see any children looking for affection. They are too weak and too hungry. The majority do not even have the strength to walk. In a makeshift hospital that resembles a ward for the dying, Kenyan doctors try to save some of them. But no nutrition program has been set up and they know in advance that their efforts will be in vain.

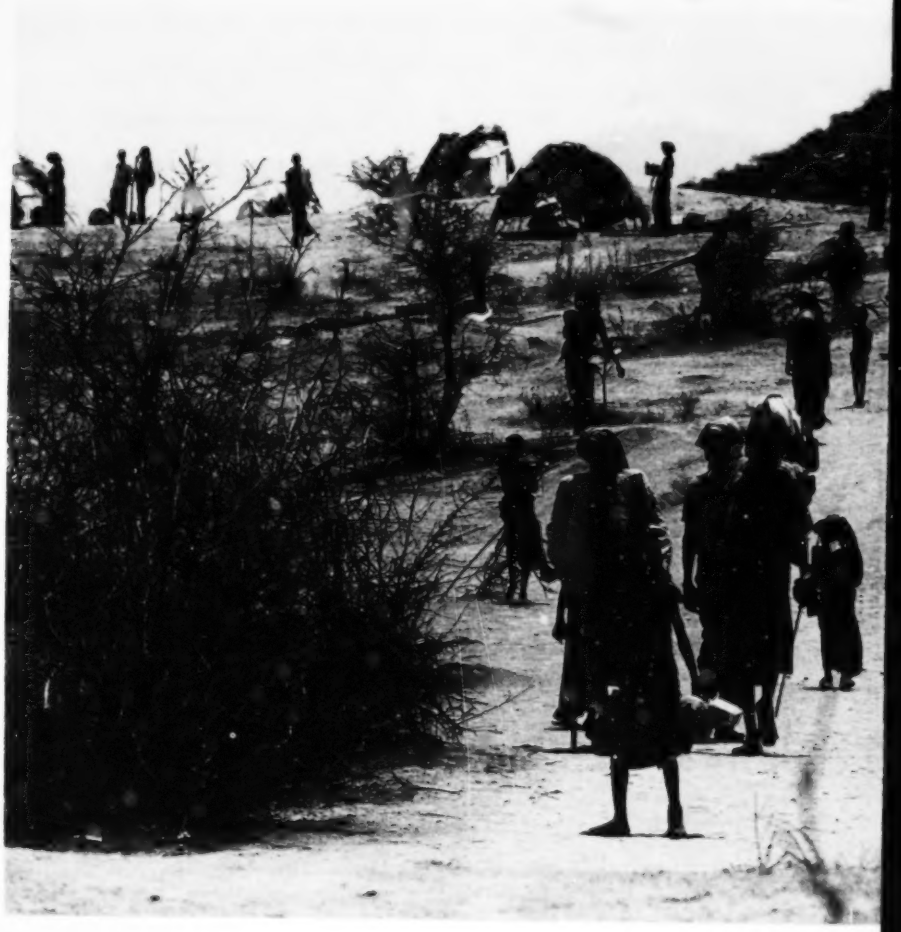
I picked up a little girl, perhaps 4 or 5 years old, but she weighed nothing, she was so light. The people nearby explained to me through gestures that her mother's head had been cut off. The little girl snuggled up to me without saying anything and did not move. I could feel her tiny heart beating, but I could not help wondering for how long. It was immensely tempting to take her away, feed her and love her. But all around her there are hundreds and thousands of others. Starving shadows, small refugees, the children of poverty. We could provide the means to save you. Why are there so few helpers, when so many need help?

They take your hand shyly and implore you in silence: "I am all alone. Please love me."

The High Commissioner for Refugees lacks funds, but what about Red Cross societies, humanitarian organizations, governments? It is a cruel and intolerable situation. But I have seen worse.

A LIVING NIGHTMARE

In eastern Kenya, in a semi-arid region beneath a burning sun, are the camps of Liboi, Ifo, Dagahaley, nightmarish visions which one would like to think could never exist.



At Liboi, near the Somali border, the route taken by the refugees is littered with the bones and rotting carcasses of camels and other animals. The refugees arrive in small groups, half-naked or in rags. Their heads are full of the horrors they have seen, but in their eyes one cannot read anything, only extreme fatigue and unmitigated despair. Once they reach the border, they sit down and wait in silence. A few sticks of wood, a goatskin, a jerrycan of water and some pots and pans are all they possess. Drought and war have killed off their herds. To reach this place, where they hope to find something to eat, some have walked 200 kilometers. The children, worn out, have followed them. Many died on the way.

Destitution and hunger. In the beginning, it seems that one will go mad just thinking about it. But then one becomes used to the situation. The more seriously ill are sent to the nearby hospital run by Médecins Sans Frontières. The others are transported 20 kilometers away to the camps at Ifo and Dagahaley.

How can one describe the camps? In the middle of a vast, sandy plain where a few skeletal goats pick at dry thorn bushes, thousands of tents are inhabited by half-starved Somali refugees. Hunger can be seen everywhere: in the distended stomachs, in the skeletal limbs, in the protruding eyes and the slow gestures. The only thriving population is that of the vultures, huge and terrifyingly ugly. They are everywhere. Like sentinels of death, they maintain their remorseless vigil.

The WFP sends maize, oil, beans and flour and these are regularly distributed. So what is wrong?

SCENES OF HORROR

Working here requires dedication. Each tent has its share of horror. In the evening, it is cool and the woman who has just given birth, covered in blood and urine, has nothing, not even a scrap of cloth, to clean or cover her baby. Over there, a man is dying. In another tent, a little girl is crying for her mother, who has just been buried by a neighbor. In yet another, two indescribably thin children are stretched out beside their mother, who is too weak to take them to the health center. Even if she did have the strength, the center is full to overflowing. The French doctors no longer have time to sleep. There are three children to each bed. The number of adults and children suffering from severe malnutrition is enormous and in no way corresponds to the number of health workers. If they are to be saved, there must be more doctors, more time, more money.

Seen from Europe, one might ask how such a disaster could occur. The

UNHCR Photo

Hunger and fatigue exact a heavy toll on refugees arriving in Gurar transit camp near Moyale

WFP sends maize, oil, beans and flour and these are regularly distributed. So what is wrong? No attention has been paid to the eating habits of these people, nomads from the earliest age, who almost exclusively eat fresh meat and drink camels' milk. Their digestive systems refuse to assimilate anything else. They live by age-old habits and are ignorant of other types of food. When beans were first distributed, women in the camp cooked them in boiling water for a few minutes and then threw them away thinking they had been given stones to eat.

The United Nations could use more imagination and be more flexible. During the initial period, newly arrived refugees could be given fresh meat and camels' milk and, at the same time, taught about other foodstuffs. This would cost $100,000 a month and would prevent such widespread malnutrition. The beans could be replaced by lentils. The Arab League could be asked to help their Moslem brothers by sending dates, and more NGOs could be asked to help on the spot.

> *No attention has been paid to the eating habits of these people.*

ENDLESS PROBLEMS

Above all, what is needed is greater generosity and more money. Donor countries are reticent, tired of supporting an Africa which is disintegrating. Understandably, they blame Africans for their poor management, the greed of their leaders, the seemingly endless conflicts.

In Kenya, the man in the street notes that the imposition of democratic ideals by the countries of the North has re-ignited old hatreds that could lead to new conflicts. For him, the withholding of foreign aid, the result of a nation's failure to respect human rights, only means higher prices. He protests at the fact that the international community sends its

Offloading food aid for starving Somalians at the port of Mogadishu

UNHCR Photo

supply lorries through areas where Kenyans themselves are dying of hunger, in order to feed foreign refugees.

It should not be forgotten that, even if calm is restored in Sudan, Ethiopia and Somalia tomorrow, there still remains the insuperable problem of drought. In northeast Kenya, it is causing untold damage.

In Europe, we are overwhelmed by problems closer to home and we are tired of Africa. Nevertheless, the drought in Africa, in addition to poverty and the poor state of health of the population, is directly affecting the lives of millions of innocent children.

Like the ostrich, we can hide our heads in the sand while waiting for better days to come. We can be cynical and say that, if we hope to sell them our products, it is preferable to keep them alive. Or we can realize that these people cannot be denied the right to live. We cannot leave them to die while we suffer from eating too much. In a spirit of solidarity, we can show our faith in the future and decide to help them.

YVETTE PIERPAOLI
European Representative
Refugees International

Mozambican refugees foraging for fuelwood strain scarce resources in Zimbabwe

ZIMBABWE:

Barely enough to go around

A flood of Mozambican asylum-seekers is straining relief channels in drought-stricken Zimbabwe, where the government is already hard-pressed to feed an estimated 6 million of its own people — more than half the population.

Rural Mozambicans have not seen peace in their country since 1964. Now, the worst drought in living memory has left the country in a shambles. Starved and in rags, Mozambicans have been fleeing their homes in droves.

In Zimbabwe, which has provided asylum to Mozambicans in refugee camps since 1984, the influx is putting pressure on the already scarce resources upon which both the refugees and the host community depend. Supplies of available land, water and firewood are diminishing daily in the ecologically critical areas around refugee camps. Nutrients have long since vanished from the semi-arid soils.

Mazowe River Bridge camp, with more than 30,000 refugees, and Tongogara camp, with some 41,000, illustrate the problem.

The emergency influx of refugees into these camps quickly depleted the surrounding vegetation. Wood for construction of shelters, fuel and other activities is now in short supply, and there is insufficient agricultural land to sustain the local population. Crop production is bound to decline further because the soil is not left fallow long enough to allow regeneration.

PROGNOSIS: POOR

Although aid agencies and the host government are increasing assistance to environmental projects around

these camps, dramatic improvements are unlikely in the near future because of the drought and growing population pressures.

The number of refugees in the country's five rural camps shot up from 97,000 in December 1991 to 113,000 six months later. UNHCR officials in Zimbabwe say there are an estimated 3,500 new arrivals every month because of the drought.

The emergency situation has severely affected Chambuta, the newest camp in Zimbabwe. Chambuta's population rose from about 6,000 refugees in January of this year to some 16,500 in May. The construction of shelters and sanitary facilities has failed to keep up with this rapid influx. Relief workers say there is an urgent need for plastic sheeting and shelter poles, cement for latrines, clothing and blankets.

Added to this flow of refugees are Mozambican laborers laid off by commercial farmers as a result of the drought in Zimbabwe. With no alternative means for survival, they have turned to refugee camps in search of food.

There is little chance the Mozambican refugees will be assimilated into the Zimbabwean community, particularly since the local population itself does not have enough land or resources.

"As much as the government would like to integrate the refugees into the local community, the current situation in Zimbabwe is unique," said Wadzanai Garwe, a UNHCR program assistant in Harare. "In view of the land problem, the question of naturalization is unthought of.

"As a result of the shortage of land, the policy of the government has been that refugees live in camps under care and maintenance."

TOTALLY DEPENDENT

Since the refugees are kept in the fenced camps for security reasons, they depend entirely on aid agencies for all their requirements — water, food, shelter, health and sanitation.

The majority of the adult refugees are women, but children constitute the largest group — 57 percent. According to UNHCR records, there are more than 62,200 children under 18 in the five camps in Zimbabwe.

The government estimates there are another 100,000 Mozambicans outside the camps who have spontaneously settled along the border. These people are likely to seek asylum in the camps because the drought is making it increasingly difficult for them to survive without assistance.

As more refugees stream into the country daily, food deliveries to refugee camps are causing increasing tensions.

While Zimbabwe's grain marketing board must consider the food needs of the refugee population, it must also ensure that any distribution plan is equitable and does not appear to favor foreigners. As a result of drought, Zimbabwe has sought donor assistance to cover a deficit of 1.86 million tons in local grain production this year.

Although residents of the refugee camps have in the past tilled small plots of land to supplement the basic rations provided by UNHCR and the World Food Program, the weather failed them this year.

BALANCE REQUIRED

The drought has made it imperative that resources be shared equally, according to UNHCR's Garwe. All agencies involved in caring for the refugees are trying hard to balance their services to refugees and the host society.

Rations provided by UNHCR and WFP consist of maize meal, fish, beans and cooking oil. However, supplementary feeding has to be increased for children below five years of age and other vulnerable groups because most new arrivals are suffering from severe malnutrition.

Relief deliveries to the camps are becoming increasingly costly because supplies have to be imported via the ports of Durban, South Africa, or Beira, Mozambique, and then transported overland to Zimbabwe.

Water is also a serious problem at all camps as nearby supplies have dried up. Diarrhea cases are reported regularly in the camps, and health officials are wary of cholera outbreaks as more Mozambicans pour in from areas where it is endemic.

ANACLET RWEGAYURA
Inter Press Service, Harare

GLOBAL WARNING

As early as January this year, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) alerted the international community to the devastating effects of drought on southern Africa's cereal harvest.

A series of "special alerts" were issued by the FAO's Global Information and Early Warning System. The alerts were based in part on the findings of missions fielded jointly with the World Food Program to assess the impact of the drought on food supplies and to determine emergency food aid requirements. Subsequently, these findings were incorporated in a special appeal for funds issued in May by the UN Secretary-General on behalf of the affected countries.

While some donors have responded generously, as of late June less than half of the food aid requirements had been covered. But there is still time to avert widespread famine in southern Africa if the international community heeds the current warnings.

Known as GIEWS, the early warning system is one of the most important tools available in the struggle against famine. It permits affected countries and their international partners to take timely action to cope with food shortages caused by natural and man-made disasters, thereby minimizing suffering and loss of life.

The role of GIEWS is to assess in advance the effects on food supply of such factors as adverse weather and changes in planted area, price, market behavior and government.

The system is not designed to

predict sudden, massive population movements such as flows of refugees and displaced people, this being a function of UNHCR. However, GIEWS does include the requirements of refugees and displaced people in its special alerts and other reports.

MONITORING SUPPLY

The system monitors the global supply and demand for all basic foods. It provides warnings not only of food shortages but also of surpluses. All elements which affect food supply and demand are monitored. These variables include weather; animal and plant diseases and pests; range and crop land conditions; transportation and storage problems; and government policies affecting production, nutrition, consumption, prices, commodities-trading and ocean freight rates.

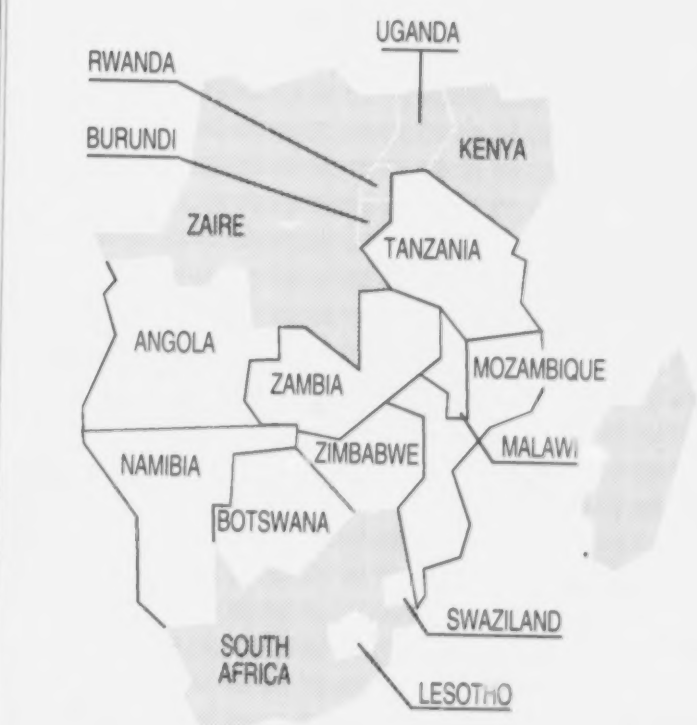
FAO also helps developing countries establish or improve their own early warning systems. Many governments recognize the importance of improved forecasting, planning and management of food supplies. Some developing countries have found it difficult to participate in GIEWS because they lack information-gathering systems. Often, these are the very countries which most need such a system. One of GIEWS's main priorities, therefore, is the establishment or strengthening of national and regional early warning and food information systems in cooperation with FAO's Food Security Assistance Scheme.

In African countries, GIEWS supplements its field reports with satellite monitoring of vegetation and with computerized agrometeorological-based water balance models to reach a qualitative estimate of crop development.

Another innovation under development in several countries is risk mapping. The aim here is to generate information on the size and breakdown of populations whose food security faces potential threat.

PETER NEWHOUSE
Food and Agriculture Organization, Rome

Drought in southern Africa



The UN Secretary General has appealed for $685 million to buy 4 million tons of grain for this region which is reeling from the worst drought in living memory.

The drought threatens more than 18 million people with starvation.

FOCUS

Mozambican refugees at Chimbiya camp search for water as wells dry up

Survival strategy for Malawi

The drought in southern Africa is causing severe food shortages in Malawi, a nation of 8 million people and temporary home to nearly 1 million Mozambican refugees.

This year's harvest in Malawi is expected to be less than half of the 1991 total. To make up for the shortfall, the country will have to import some 800,000 metric tons of maize, the staple diet, in addition to 107,201 metric tons required for the refugees.

Unfortunately, the districts most severely hit by drought are also those crammed with the most refugees. In most of these areas, there is a 100 percent crop failure. The situation is compounded by water wells drying up.

The impact of the long dry spell could be devastating. Even in the best of times, there is a high level of malnutrition among children: one-third of them die before reaching the age of five. Of those who survive, 56 percent suffer from permanent nutritional defects.

An estimated 1 million Malawian children are expected to be affected by the drought. Without massive food aid, a sharp increase in infant and child mortality rates is likely.

Recent studies have shown that the health situation in the refugee camps is closely related to conditions in the local Malawi communities where they are located. A good harvest by Malawians in the past gave Mozambicans greater access to food. Crop failures, on the other hand, prompted Mozambicans to share rations with their hosts. So unless enough food is also made available to the Malawians, levels of malnutrition among Mozambicans will greatly increase even if the asylum-seekers are given enough rations.

For many years, Malawi had an enviable record of agricultural production, while most countries in Africa were experiencing crop declines. In 1984, it accumulated enough grain reserves to enable it to export 180,000 metric tons of maize to its neighbors.

The situation changed after 1986 when drought and pests caused damage to farms and the Mozambican influx began. The country bounced back and was able to supply the food needs of its people in 1989. But even then, rural households still had to supplement food resources by cultivating vegetable gardens. The current drought has demolished this survival strategy.

Although it hosts a large refugee community, Malawi does not have a well-established infrastructure to carry out massive relief operations. Without experience in mass feeding, the country faces a daunting task in caring for its hungry people. The resources of those relief agencies working in the refugee camps are already strained.

The authorities also fear problems in bringing food into the country. The war in Mozambique has closed Malawi from the east. Ports in Tanzania and South Africa could be hobbled by supplies to other drought-stricken countries and delay shipments to Malawi.

Unless enough food is brought in quickly, Malawi faces rough days ahead.

Louis A.H. Msuka
Center for Social Research
University of Malawi, Zomba

CAUGHT IN THE CROSSFIRE

The world is horrified by events in ex-Yugoslavia, where more than 2 million people have been driven from their homes by a war so brutal it defies description. As the photos on the following pages demonstrate, words alone cannot convey the human misery of Europe's worst refugee crisis since World War II.

UNHCR photos by A. Hollmann & S. Fox

A Croatian woman who has returned to her town of Lipik, West Slavonia, breaks down upon finding her home — along with every other house on the street — destroyed.

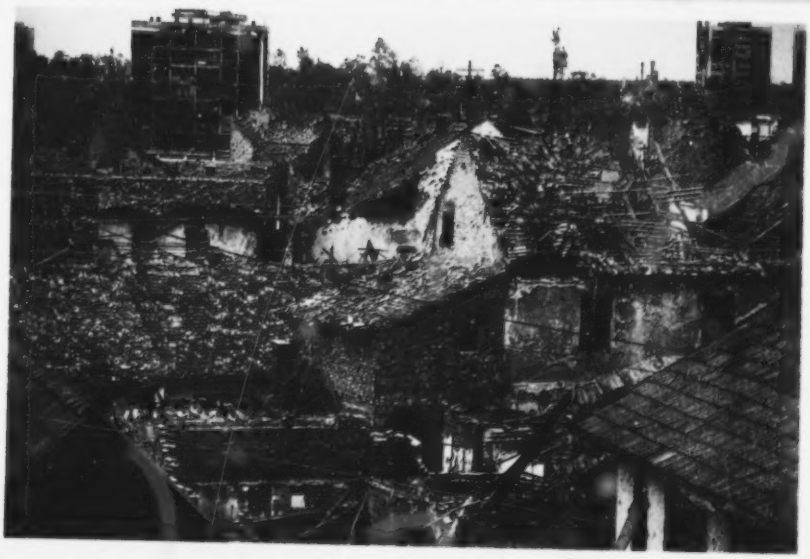
Ex-Yugoslavia

cradles her child outside a bus on the outskirts of the coastal city of Split. They were among more than 1,400 women and children who fled fighting in Sarajevo in May, only to be taken hostage temporarily by armed militiamen. When they finally reached safety in Split, there was no place to house them.

Not since World War II has Europe seen tent camps like this one, set up by the Croatian Red Cross in the port city of Rijeka. The tents are boiling hot in summer and will provide inadequate shelter during the coming winter.

In early July, world attention was focused on the UN humanitarian airlift to the besieged city of Sarajevo, an international effort involving more than 20 nations, non-governmental organizations and multilateral institutions. During an 8 July visit to Sarajevo, UN High Commissioner for Refugees Sadako Ogata reminded the international community that "there are many Sarajevos" in desperate need of food, medical care and other assistance. And she noted that the humanitarian operation led by UNHCR and UNPROFOR is no substitute for a political solution to this tragic war.

An elderly Bosnian couple forced from their home wait in a gymnasium in Sremska Mitrovica, Serbia. Many of those fleeing the fighting have never before ventured beyond their local areas and are totally dependent on outside help.



The devastation in some areas, such as here in Vukovar, is total. The inhumane practice of "ethnic cleansing" has forced the entire populations of many villages, towns and cities to flee. In other places, the "cleansing" is more selective, with only the homes of particular ethnic groups destroyed.

High Commissioner for Refugees Sadako Ogata is greeted at Sarajevo airport by Maj. Gen. Lewis MacKenzie, UNPROFOR commander in the city, during her 8 July visit. Although the airlift succeeded in moving thousands of tons of relief supplies into Sarajevo during the first few weeks, the security situation remained extremely fragile.

Bringing in relief supplies by road involves passing through numerous checkpoints like this one manned by UNPROFOR troops in Croatia.

AFGHANISTAN:

The will, but not the means

Eighty-year-old Sharif, cradling a half-dead chicken, stands in the 43 C. heat outside a UNHCR encashment center in Peshawar. With hundreds of other Afghan refugees, he waits anxiously for a chance to exchange his UNHCR ration book for a repatriation allowance of 3,300 rupees (about $130) and 300 kilograms of wheat.

An Afghan interpreter explains that Sharif hopes the pathetic scene of an old man holding his sole remaining possession and companion — a scraggly chicken — will attract pity from the UNHCR staff at the center. Sharif's family has already gone back to Afghanistan after spending 14 years in Pakistan's North West Frontier Province, where some 3 million Afghans fled fighting in their homeland. Now, Sharif is in a hurry to join them.

In the mad scramble for encashment, refugees like Sharif will resort to all kinds of ploys to get one step ahead of their neighbors. Mob scenes unfold daily outside the encashment centers as huge crowds jostle to get in the door. Until UNHCR ruled that only heads of family could encash ration books, refugees bribed old women, who played on the sympathy of the staff, to encash their passbooks.

UNHCR Program Officer John Andrews said some refugees come back three, four, even seven times before they are finally processed. Some give up and sell their ration books to others at half their value in order to return to Afghanistan quickly.

Afghan refugees are in a hurry, and hundreds of thousands are heading home. Never mind that the political situation in Afghanistan is still unclear; that the country won't be free of mines for generations; that the economy is in ruins. After 14 years in Pakistan's camps, many Afghans feel they've waited long enough. The fall of the Najibullah government in late April triggered a mad rush across the border, with returns jumping 134 percent from April to May. Moreover, a reduction in international assistance to the refugees has made it increasingly difficult for them to get by on their meager wheat ration.

So the change of government in Kabul provided the opportunity many refugees had been waiting for. Even if law and order breaks down in Kabul, Afghans know that the provinces keep a safe distance from the capital's political intrigues, allowing some degree of security.

Refugees are also afraid that their farms may be up for grabs. Bandits are roaming the Afghan countryside claiming unoccupied land. The legal owners want to make sure they get there first. Especially now that the planting season is in full swing.

FUNDS RUNNING OUT

Another element behind the massive return is a lack of confidence in the under-funded encashment program. The refugees are all too aware that the UN Secretary-General's appeal for funds for the Afghan repatriation has not triggered a significant response. On 22 June, refugees crowding encashment locations in Peshawar grew angry when they learned that the program had been temporarily halted because of a lack of cash.

All these factors contribute to a daily rush on the North West Frontier Province's 10 encashment centers. In the last six months of 1990, 65,000 people exchanged their passbooks to return to Afghanistan. The number rose to 160,000 in 1991. In the first six months of 1992, a total of 396,925 refugees from Balochistan, North West Frontier Province and Punjab cashed in their passbooks. More than 70,000 people a week are going home. But 2.44 million are still waiting.

Robert Breen, UNHCR Repatriation Officer in Peshawar, said that at the present encashment rate of 15,000 people per day, 1 million people will have repatriated by August. UNHCR is currently spending $1.5 million a week on the encashment program — about $23 per returnee. But it has received only $15 million of the $53 million requested for this year's repatriation program, and will need an additional $10 million just to cover encashment until August.

UP BEFORE DAWN

In the Peshawar district of Jamrud alone, 1,200 families arrive at dawn every day hoping to be the first in line. But the National Bank of Pakistan only works from 8:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m., handling a maximum of 2 million rupees a day ($250,000) — enough for only 600 families. The rest are turned back. Understandably, the refugees are angry and frightened.

UNHCR/S. Girard

Mob scenes unfold daily outside encashment centers in Pakistan as refugees exchange ration books for assistance on their return to Afghanistan

UNHCR's John Andrews is exhausted. "One hundred and thirty dollars may not seem much to you and me, but an Afghan family can get by for a few months on that money," he said. "They'll kill for that. I've seen 70-year-old men pulling each others' beards to get one step ahead in the queue. We need more staff and more encashment centers. That won't be possible if we don't get more money."

If anything, the situation at the wheat encashment locations is worse. UNHCR needs 300 metric tons of wheat per day for the system to work. But WFP wheat is sometimes unavailable for weeks and when it arrives, it comes in small, 50-ton shipments. At the end of June, the wheat deficit exceeded 7,000 metric tons in the North West Frontier Province and 2,000 metric tons in Balochistan.

THE FINAL HURDLE

At the Kachagari wheat distribution center managed by the Commissioner for Afghan Refugees (CAR), prospective returnees crowd the gates in hopes of getting their promised 300 kilograms of wheat. It is the final hurdle before they can repatriate.

Amrullah Sardakhan, 40, is confined to a wheel-chair after a bullet wound left him paralyzed from the waist down. He says he was unable to register at CAR headquarters because the government agency couldn't handle all the demand. So a nephew gave him his own wheat coupon to help him survive in Pakistan, but despite three attempts he has not been able to get his ration because there was no grain.

Other would-be returnees believe that on the way to the distribution centers, the WFP wheat often is delivered to Pakistani traders who hold wheat ration coupons sold to them by desperate refugees.

RETURN AT ALL COSTS

An investigation carried out by UNHCR in Peshawar corroborates this version. Everyone knows that refugees, impatient to go home and unwilling to spend their 3,300 rupees on survival in Pakistan, prefer to sell their wheat coupons, even at half their value, instead of waiting for the wheat to arrive. As deliveries become more irregular, it becomes riskier for traders to hold on to the coupons. So the price goes down. The new twist is that the wheat sometimes reaches traders before refugees.

WFP does not have enough staff to monitor the wheat all the way from the government warehouses to the distribution centers. And according to WFP, wheat arriving in Pakistan often is stuck in government warehouses.

"Afghans don't riot for food," said UNHCR's Breen. "They're a proud people. They're angry that the wheat is not available and that the encashment program sometimes breaks down. But they're not surprised. The consequences of an under-funded encashment program is that refugees

UNHCR/S. Gould

With or without their cash and wheat entitlements, Afghan refugees are returning home in droves

lose confidence in the system. This increases crowds and insecurity at encashment locations. When the money finally comes, there is a frenzied rush to our already under-staffed encashment locations. For fear of not being given a second chance, refugees who had not planned to leave will encash their passbooks and spend that money on survival in Pakistan instead of using it to repatriate. Others return precipitously when they are not ready to go."

PROBLEMS JUST BEGINNING

With or without their cash and wheat entitlements, Afghan refugee families are hiring trucks and buses and returning home in droves. But once back in Afghanistan, their problems are far from over.

The road from the Khyber Pass border post to Jalalabad, a three-hour drive, is littered with the charred hulks of Russian tanks. There are mines everywhere. Along the road, not a single electricity or telephone pole is left standing; not a single building is intact. Mile after mile, there is nothing but destruction and desolation.

Outside Jalalabad, huge bomb craters pockmark the countryside, another legacy of the savage war. Some of the craters are so deep that they are below the water table and have turned into permanent ponds. Villagers joke that the Russians worked for them as well-diggers.

Fawzia, an unusually tiny 10-year-old girl, is living testimony to the terror of those bombs. She is a roadside beggar on the outskirts of the village of Bashud. Covering her face with her "chador," she described how in 1987 a bomb killed several women and children who were in a field with her. She was blinded by shrapnel.

Further down the road, in a place called Puli Maktab (School Bridge), a returnee family unloaded their belongings next to the ruins of their home. Once, it must have been a big, prosperous house. Now, only a few walls are left standing. Fifty meters from the house is a water-filled bomb crater. The family had arrived only an hour earlier and had already set up a tent next to a clump of trees. They didn't dare go inside their house. They knew that Russian planes used to spray roofless homes with small "butterfly" anti-personnel mines.

The family had registered as refugees back in Pakistan. But Sarwad, the head of the family, left his passbook behind with his brother because he couldn't afford to wait out the encashment process. He had to go home to plant his fields. Once his brother joins him with a bit of cash and the 300 kilograms of wheat, Sarwad will proudly show him the tender green sprouts. Meanwhile, the family has no food and no clean water. In this barren land they can't even find enough firewood to boil water. But Sarwad says he is happy to be back in Afghanistan, declaring: "At least we are free now."

MILLIONS OF MINES

But that freedom has a price, sometimes a deadly one. Mines are everywhere and come in all shapes and sizes. They have been dropped randomly from the air, laid in concentrated clusters and minefields, or as booby-traps. They are in villages,

gardens, tracks and fields. Some have been washed down by floods on to previously cleared land. According to a November 1991 UN survey, there are some 10 million mines in Afghanistan.

The consequences of all this mining are only too visible. Two million people, or one in seven or eight, are disabled in Afghanistan. Of these, 20 percent, or 400,000 people, have been maimed by mines or unexploded ordnance. A recent UN survey found that 10 percent of villagers in Afghanistan and 60,600 refugees in the camps in Pakistan are disabled. In four camps surveyed, 2 percent of all men were amputees. At least 50,000 Afghans have been provided with artificial limbs.

Assuming that a manual de-mining program can clear 30 square kilometers a year, it would take 4,300 years to clear 20 percent of Afghanistan. That doesn't mean de-mining can't be attempted. UNOCA (Office for the Coordination of United Nations Humanitarian and Economic Assistance Programs Relating to Afghanistan) began a de-mining program in early 1989. In 1990, the program shifted emphasis from mine-awareness courses for refugees in Pakistan to similar instruction for people inside Afghanistan. Mine removal is now four-fifths of the budget.

Some 650,400 men and 102,400 women, mostly Afghan refugees in Pakistan, have received a six-hour course in mine awareness. More than 13,500 Afghan men have been trained in basic de-mining techniques.

LAND AND SECURITY

UNOCA soon discovered there was no direct link between mine clearance and repatriation. Afghan refugees, especially women, are not deterred from repatriation by fear of mines. Higher on their priority list are general security considerations and the ability to farm their lands. So UNOCA is now concentrating on clearing existing inhabited villages and important access roads.

Inside Afghanistan, UNOCA currently employs 27 full-time de-mining teams of 32 Afghans each. So far, the teams have cleared 68 square kilometers, but it has been costly in lives. Sixteen of the de-miners have been killed and 20 others injured.

With the current 27 teams, it would take UNOCA at least 15 years to clear only the most basic priority areas. UNOCA would therefore like to increase the number of de-mining teams to 50. But more money is needed. The 1992 budget of $15.5 million was increased to $21 million. Only $6 million of that has been received so far, and there are no more firm funds in the pipeline. UNOCA has now run out of funds, and may have to suspend the whole program, or drastically curtail it.

NATION IN RUINS

Nearly everything in Afghanistan needs rebuilding — irrigation canals, agricultural land, roads, bridges, hospitals and schools. According to a UNHCR situation report dated 2 July, "the main problem preventing people from returning is the lack of water for irrigation and consumption."

NGOs and UN development agencies have been carrying out modest but successful cross-border operations inside Afghanistan since 1988. In mid-June, UNHCR sent to Afghanistan an experienced team of 11 staff, some made available through the Norwegian Refugee Council, and two senior UNHCR officers from Headquarters. They've opened UNHCR sub-offices in Herat, Kandahar, Jalalabad and Mazar-i-Sharif. Security conditions permitting, other sub-offices will be opened in Pul-i-Khumri and Gardez.

Geldolph Everts, UNHCR's head of desk for Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan, said the staff in Afghanistan initially will keep a low profile.

"These people are going to towns that haven't had UN assistance in 14 years," Everts said. "These are real pioneers. And they're not going to burst in there waving a UN flag and saying 'here we are.' On the contrary, in Afghanistan, if you don't have much to offer in terms of money and goods — and we don't — you had better keep a low profile.

"What our people are there to do is to put their ear to the ground and find out everything they can on what kind of people are coming back; how many there are; where they're going to; what their assistance needs are; whether they have any protection problems; and what other problems they have. UNHCR also is putting together modest community projects that can be implemented quickly. What we don't want to do is create expectations with lines of trucks filled with goodies because anyone with a Kalashnikov can come up and say 'I want the same goodies.' We see our role as doing our share for returnees and grabbing others by the collar and telling them to do their share."

For the time being, according to Nicholas Morris, UNHCR special envoid in Pakistan, the simplest, easiest and most cost-effective way of helping returnees is to ensure that the encashment program works smoothly.

"Encashment is both the most appropriate, and the only practical way, of assisting the largest and fastest repatriation for which UNHCR has ever tried to provide direct assistance to returnees," Morris said in a recent telex to the High Commissioner.

CREDIBILITY AT STAKE

"The credibility of not just UNHCR's but in large measure the UN's response to the long-awaited return of Afghans hangs on the continued encashment. If we run out of funds... returnees would ... lose what is likely to be the only outside assistance most will get."

It is unfortunate that the international community, which has for years promoted the return of the refugees, is losing interest now that this is finally becoming a reality.

Says Morris: "Despite its other humanitarian preoccupations, it is certainly the least the international community should do."

Sylvie Girard

THE STORY OF TUOT

or... How UNHCR changed its mind

"Tuot Yok!" The name rang through the UNHCR reception center for returning Cambodian refugees. The short, wiry Cambodian collected his large family and approached the desk where UNHCR field officer Dewaree Kanchanaphet was thumbing through a large pile of dollars.

She found his name on the passenger manifest of the convoy that had just arrived from Thailand, confirmed that he indeed had six children, and handed him $400 — equivalent to three times the annual income of the average Cambodian family.

If Tuot felt rich, it didn't show. He counted his money without visible emotion, made the mark of a thumb print on the receipt, and countersigned. As he left, I realized there was something strange about him. He walked easily enough, but his feet were small — unnaturally small. They were also made of wood. Somewhere along the line, in his long odyssey from Cambodia to exile and now back home, Tuot had lost both his legs.

I watched him with growing curiousity. Who was he? How had he come by such an injury — and how was he coping? What was he going to do with so much money? How was he going to keep it safe?

Maybe these questions should be put to UNHCR. What was the organization doing handing out such sums to returning Cambodians, after promising them land?

The answer is: changing course. Originally, UNHCR's repatriation plan

UNHCR / Gaud

Cambodian returnee receives cash assistance at the Sisophon reception center

rested on two basic assumptions: first, that every refugee family should be free to return to the destination of their choice; and second, that they should be given two hectares of agricultural land.

Last year, both assumptions made sense. Two thirds of the refugees came from a rural background, and freedom of choice is one of the cardinal principles behind repatriation. But by 30 March 1992 — the day that the first convoy crossed the border — the situation had changed. Three quarters of the camp population had registered to return to northwestern Cambodia even though many did not originally live in the area — an area, moreover, that is heavily mined and desperately short of good agricultural land.

So it was back to the drawing board almost as soon as repatriation began. This produced a major shift in policy. On 20 May, UNHCR decided to expand the geographical area of repatriation to other regions of Cambodia, besides the northwest, and also to broaden the range of options open to the refugees.

In addition to transport and a year's supply of food, refugees like Tuot can choose land. But they will have to wait until land becomes available. Second, they can opt for a housing plot and a housing kit. Third, they can choose money — $50 for each adult (over 12 years of age), $25 for each child. The fourth option is a professional tool kit.

Finally, they can return outside

the scope of the UNHCR repatriation. Such "spontaneous" returnees are still entitled to a year's food if they present proof of having been refugees at UNHCR offices in Cambodia.

There was one further important modification: instead of giving returnees *carte blanche* to pick their eventual destination, priority would be given to those returning to their original villages. The first movements have shown that relatives and friends can help to cushion the shock of re-entry, and provide returnees with a "soft landing."

Ten weeks into repatriation, the so-called "land option" is not dead. Settlers will shortly start planting rice in rich farmland in the province of Banteay Meanchey, and UNHCR has approved a Quick Impact Project (QIP) of $20,000 to help returnees buy seeds and cover the costs of ploughing.

But repatriation no longer hinges on UNHCR's ability to find two hectares for each family, and this has enabled UNHCR to accelerate the pace: 928 in March; 4,857 in April; 13,426 in May; over 20,000 in June. By the end of May, trains were leaving Sisophon for the long journey to Phnom Penh every four days, carrying 20,029 returnees bound for the center of the country.

Observers have generally been impressed by what Raul Jenner, a respected NGO consultant, describes as UNHCR's "pragmatism and flexibility." Diplomats breathed a sigh of relief. All of a sudden, the goal of moving everyone back by the end of the year seemed less daunting.

Of course, the new policy throws up plenty of challenges. Housing land still has to be found, and housing kits delivered — not an easy task during the rains.

The so-called "cash option" has also prompted plenty of internal debate. Was UNHCR failing in its duty to the refugees and "buying them off" by handing out cash? We concluded not — that it made more sense to face facts than persist with an unworkable plan. But cash presented its own problems: which currency would be less disruptive to the local economy and most beneficial to the returnees — American dollars or Cambodian riels? After more debate, it was decided that dollars would retain their value better. This, however, raised the prospect of refugees carrying large amounts of money around Cambodia at a time of deteriorating security. As always, no easy answers.

How have the refugees responded to the change in policy? Initially, most chose option two — a housing plot. This was not surprising. Since repatriation began on 30 March, several hundred houses have been built by returnees in the northwest, and the thriving settlements are a visible and exciting symbol of repatriation.

If the Paris peace plan takes hold in Cambodia, anything is possible, and that includes a massive spontaneous movement home.

But timber merchants have also found it hard to keep up with the demand for wood, and shortages have occurred. Word of this reached the camps, and made the cash option more attractive. Another incentive appears to have been a series of hammer blows in Site 2, the largest camp in Thailand. On 1 June, refugees staged a violent protest, closed the camp and halted repatriation.

Coming after a storm, and a fire, the demonstration was a serious blow to the camp's morale. Many of the refugees now signing up for money apparently feel that it offers them the fastest way home. After just three weeks, UNHCR had given out $504,000.

How will returnees spend their cash grant? More to the point — how will they save it in isolated rural areas where there are no banks? I wondered whether Tuot would answer frankly, or whether he would be disconcerted by the inevitable audience of curious onlookers. I need not have worried. He spoke easily enough — and grinned when an old one-legged returnee elbowed into the interview, wanting to know whether UNHCR was laying on something special for amputees.

Tuot is 46 years old. He was born near the village of Pha'aw, in eastern Battambang. From 1975 to 1979, he served in the army of the Khmer Rouge, and left for the border when the Vietnamese invaded. In May 1986 he went looking for wood near the Site 8 camp and stepped on a mine. It blew both his legs off just above the knee.

Coming home will bring some respite, but it may not be easy for a former Khmer Rouge soldier to return to an area that is under the control of the state of Cambodia at a time when such factional labels are still highly relevant in this troubled country.

One of the goals of UNTAC (the UN Transitional Authority in Cambodia) is to change this and prepare the country for elections. In his own small way, Tuot could contribute. He is visible proof that mines have little regard for Cambodia's internal frontiers and squabbling factions — and of the desperate need for reconciliation.

But Tuot is also clearly apprehensive at the thought of carrying large sums with him, through the Cambodian countryside. Before we talked, his sister had just visited the Sisophon reception center to make the final arrangements for her brother to return home to Pha'aw on an ox cart. She told Tuot that thieves had entered Pha'aw a month ago and stolen several cows. "I worried about that most of last night," he admitted. His best chance for security probably lies with UNTAC's contingent of blue-bereted civilian police who conduct 24-hour

patrols in the northwest. CIVPOL, as it is known, has proved to be a valuable partner for UNHCR.

Tuot will also be struggling against an awesome disability in a country which has no social security, pensions, or even widespread health care. At first I assumed this was why he had chosen cash. I was wrong. For Tuot, money offers the chance to return to the land that UNHCR has been unable to provide.

He has no skills except farming, so he plans to use some of his money to plough his sister's land in Pha'aw and plant rice. He's amazingly mobile for a man with artificial legs, but he knows that he won't be able to manipulate a plough. That's where his money will help. He can put some towards the cost of hiring a tractor ($10 per hectare). In short, with his large family, his sister's land, his $400 grant, and the prospect of food for a year, Tuot has a reassuring safety net. In addition, he is still in a way taking advantage of "the land option."

So, after his long exile, Tuot returns home to find his roots, physically damaged but also hopeful and extraordinarily resilient. UNHCR will also need some resilience in the weeks ahead. In spite of having brought back 50,000 Cambodians in three months, the organization is constantly reminded that this is still only one tenth of the population in the border camps, and that voter registration for next year's election begins on 1 October.

The skepticism is not justified. If the Paris peace plan takes hold in Cambodia, anything is possible, and that includes a massive spontaneous movement home. Even if the optimism is misplaced, and refugees still remain in the border camps at the end of the year, it now seems certain that a formula will be found that will enable Cambodians to vote from outside their country.

What UNHCR must do, clearly, is remain pragmatic and respond to each new challenge, if necessary by changing course, as it did over the question of agricultural land. There are certainly challenges ahead. At the time of writing, the climate in Cambodia is grim, hardly conducive to mass returns. But there is something remorseless about UNTAC's gathering presence — 14,000 soldiers as of 20 June — and the determination of the international community to bring peace to this embattled country.

Combine this with flexibility by UNHCR and the clear desire of the refugees to come home, and anything seems possible. Just ask Tuot.

Iain Guest

Otaki reception center in Battambang: the UN hopes to remove potentially divisive factional labels

UNHCR/I. Guest

The Hmong have become French Guyana's top supplier of fresh vegetables

HMONG IN FRENCH GUYANA
An improbable gamble

A group of some 1,000 Hmong, a Laotian hilltribe, has won an improbable gamble by not only integrating but prospering in French Guyana, 20,000 kilometers from their native land.

In 1975, along with tens of thousands of other Hmong, they crossed the Mekong river into refugee camps in Thailand. They said the new communist government in their homeland would never forgive them for siding with the French, and later with the Americans.

Over the centuries, the Hmong's fierce desire to remain free has forced them repeatedly into exile and a nomadic way of life. They were originally from Tibet where, for thousands of years, they had led a separate life from the rest of Chinese society. Chinese emperors drove them out in the middle of the 19th century. A long journey on foot towards the Indo-Chinese peninsula took them to the highest mountains of Laos and Vietnam. There, at an altitude of 1,500 meters, they used their extraordinary

agricultural talents to coax from a reluctant soil enough poppies to supply China with 40 tons of high-grade opium a year.

Father Pierre Bertrais, a French missionary who first arrived in Laos in 1948, and decided overnight to spend the rest of his life helping the Hmong, realized that what these people had achieved with poppies they could do with other crops. In 1975, while he was working in the Vinai refugee camp in Thailand trying to find resettlement solutions for the Hmong, he thought: "Why not French Guyana?"

The idea, which Bertrais discussed with the refugees themselves, did not seem so far-fetched. The proud and independent hilltribes found life in a refugee camp particularly unbearable, and although France and the United States offered resettlement opportunities, the Hmong had failed to integrate into the suburbs of Paris or Los Angeles. What they wanted was a chance to rebuild their lives in a virgin territory, preserving their traditions and doing what they knew best: agriculture.

In November 1977, dozens of Hmong families, with nothing but the clothes on their back and a few seeds in their pockets, arrived at the airport in Cayenne. That same night, army trucks took them south, a two-hour drive through the jungle to the site of Cacao. The only "building" was a large, unused shed by the Conté river surrounded by primeval jungle. By dawn the next day, everyone was busy clearing the forest. "We got up at four, stopped one hour for lunch and continued until sundown," recalled Li Chao, an agricultural engineer. "In the evening, we got together to plan the next day's work."

A month later, they had cleared enough land to build the village's first 100 houses. In the next three months, 300 hectares of underbrush and 190 hectares of forest were cleared for planting. Each family was allotted a little more than one hectare.

The Hmong were in a hurry. The National Cooperation Committee (C.N.E.), a French organization created to help refugees from Southeast Asia, had reluctantly agreed to the French Guyana project, giving the Hmong two years to achieve self-sufficiency. In the meantime, the C.N.E. gave each refugee 50 French francs per day for their individual needs. But the refugees put FF 47 in a common pool to buy agricultural tools, living on only FF 3.

Two years later, the Hmong had won the impossible gamble. Not only had they become self-sufficient, but they had also founded another village, Javouhay, further north, close to Suriname. It hadn't been easy. The soil was poor, and insects and plagues attacked the crops. In 1981, discouraged by the hard work, half the village left.

Those who stayed behind remember the hardships. A teenager from Javouhay tells how, at night, taking advantage of the full moon, the whole family would run behind the father who was learning how to ride a bicycle. He had to learn because once a week he would have to travel over 20 kilometers of dirt road and another 20 of highway to sell the fruit and vegetables in the nearest town. Later, with the money from the sales, they bought scooters. Today, well before daybreak, long lines of pick-up trucks set out from Cacao and Javouhay to supply all of French Guyana with fresh fruit and vegetables.

Well beyond self-sufficiency, the Hmong community succeeded in becoming French Guyana's single most important supplier of fresh produce — to the point that the local market can no longer absorb it all. Victims of their own success, the Hmong are now faced with an unforeseen problem: over-production. Coupled with a high birth rate (most families have between seven and eight children), this means young Hmong will no longer be able to work in agriculture and will have to look for job opportunities elsewhere.

Today, Cacao has become French Guyana's second tourist attraction. Thousands of people come every year to see the colorful Hmong New Year celebrations and walk through the neat rows of wooden houses mounted on stilts on either side of asphalted lanes lined with palms, hibiscus and flamboyant trees.

Thanks to Father Bertais's life-long dedication to the creation of a Hmong alphabet and to the transcription of their entire oral tradition, Javouhay has become the world center for the distribution of Hmong culture. Books written in Hmong are published in Javouhey and exported to China's Hmong population. The incredible success story of the Hmong in French Guyana cannot be explained by hard work and agricultural skills alone. The source of these people's strength is their ancestral communitarian structure based on the clan, the members of which consider themselves the descendants of the same ancestor. Cacao and Javouhay are made up of seven clans, represented by a council of elders who settle any differences that may arise. Thanks to their initial isolation, the Hmong were able to preserve their most valuable asset: their cultural uniqueness.

Eric Martin

Hmong population in the world

- **China:** 2 million
- Mountains of **Laos**, **Vietnam** and **Thailand:** 500,000
- **USA:** 97,000
- In refugee camps in **Thailand** along the Mekong river: 50,000
- **France:** 8,000
- **French Guyana:** 1,200
- Lesser numbers in Argentina and Australia.

UNHCR/B. Press

CHILDREN

Joc, a barefoot skeleton of a boy, has no idea why he and his 12,500 young companions in a ragtag children's army have spent the past five years wandering 2,500 kilometers across the deserts of Sudan, Ethiopia and Kenya.

"I was walking because everybody else ahead of me was also walking," Joc said recently, after the thousands of young Sudanese boys aged 9 to 16 arrived in Kenya on the latest leg of their tragic odyssey. "I did not know why we were walking or where we were going to," he said. "Most of all, I was afraid of being left behind alone, as everybody else was walking faster than me."

The plight of Joc and his comrades is one of the most tragic and pathetic legacies of a war so brutal that even children are regarded as little more than cannon fodder.

Authorities believe many of the 12,500 boys were taken from their families at a very young age by Sudanese rebel forces trying to ensure a future supply of fighters. Some reports say one simple criteria for conscription into this children's militia was the presence of two molar teeth. Other reliable reports say the boys have been used as advance troops to clear minefields.

The boys and several adults arrived in northwest Kenya on 29 May to escape fierce fighting in southern Sudan, where they had spent the previous year after a previous tortuous journey from exile in Ethiopia. After a 12-hour walk through the desert, they arrived late at night in Lokichokio, 25 kilometers south of the Sudanese border and about 1,000 kilometers northwest of Nairobi. Like the rest of the refugee population in Kenya, they are now under the protection of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the Government of Kenya, and special arrangements have been made with non-governmental organizations for their care under UNHCR's Guidelines

Children marching in Nasir in Southern Sudan: reports say some are used as advance troops to clear mines

OF WAR

on Refugee Children.

The boys said their "teache " had told them early on 29 May to pack up and leave. They didn't know why and they didn't know where they were.

Many, like Joc, were suffering from a variety of nutrition-related diseases. Joc has also been sick with bilharzia — a deadly, water-borne parasite — since crossing a river on the way from Ethiopia to Sudan in 1991.

The boys' story began in the mid-1980s when they fled from southern Sudan to Ethiopia for "a better education," according to Mamar, who describes himself as teacher to a group of 500 of the children. He is also a member of the rebel Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), which has been waging a separatist war in the Christian/animist south against the predominantly Islamic, Arabic-speaking north.

"In Ethiopia, we had schools and

wanted to raise a well-educated new generation, for a better future for our country," added Mamar.

But it is no secret that many of the boys received paramilitary training. The evidence can be seen about 5 kilometers from Lokichokio camp, at the ICRC hospital where several 18- to 20-year-old boys are lying injured — some without legs.

Fifteen-year-old Alier says his nightmarish odyssey began when he was separated from his family during an air strike on his village.

"I was sitting at home with my parents and uncles, and then left the house with my eldest sister and brother to get water from the nearby well," he said. "On our way back we saw some airplanes flying low, heard screams from our village and saw many people running away. We dropped the water and started running to our house where we found the gate wide open with nobody inside. Outside in the streets everybody was screaming and running. My brother took me out of the house and we rushed in the same direction as everybody else. The second day I lost my brother among the crowd. This was in June 1987, the last time I saw my brother and parents."

For the past five years, Alier and thousands of other boys in similar circumstances have been wandering the desert with their "teachers."

Alier says he wants help finding his parents, but adds: "If we do not find them, would you bring me back to the others?"

It is obvious that the thousands of youngsters have become their own substitute family — providing a sense of security and belonging.

By sheer luck, about 4,000 of the boys were reunited with their families during the recent journey into Kenya. About 10,000 adults from southern Sudan crossed the border at the same time the boys were arriving at the frontier. It was the one bright spot in what was otherwise a tragic and panicked mass exodus from Sudan, said UNHCR field officer Ian Lethbridge.

Many of the boys do not know if they are in Sudan, Ethiopia or Kenya. Asked their place of origin, they give the name of a town. They have no sense of national identity and most have never even heard of Khartoum, the capital of Sudan.

The boys become adults ahead of their time, sharing the responsibilities of their communal life. Under the supervision of their "teachers," they must gather firewood, carry water and perform all the other chores of basic survival.

The Lokichokio refugee transit center is now controlled by UNHCR, whose personnel are busy organizing food distribution. UNHCR's Representative in Kenya, Carrol Faubert, ordered shelter materials, water tanks and extra staff into the area to provide emergency assistance for the new arrivals, using funds from the $500,000 released by Mrs. Sadako Ogata, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, for the influx from Sudan.

Many of the boys do not know if they are in Sudan, Ethiopia or Kenya. They have no sense of national identity and most have never even heard of Khartoum.

The minors were scheduled for transfer in late July or early August to Kakuma camp, about 80 kilometers south of Lokichokio, according to UNHCR Field Officer Emery Brusset. He said the transfer was necessary because of the proximity of Lokichokio to the border.

The Lutheran World Federation will be the lead agency coordinating the relief assistance to the refugees in Kakuma camp.

But what does the future hold for these boys? UNHCR's Faubert expressed the hope that conditions will improve in Sudan and that all of them will be able to return and reunite with their families.

In the meantime, the non-governmental organization, Rädda-Barnen Sweden, under UNHCR guidance and supervision, is preparing a specific program for the boys.

The program will include:

- Interviewing and documenting the history of each boy to facilitate tracing and family reunification.
- Interim care while awaiting family reunification.
- Psycho-social support for unaccompanied minors suffering from trauma.

ICRC will carry out the family tracing activities, and Street Kids International will take care of the educational needs of all refugee children.

This recent influx adds an extra burden for the Government of Kenya and the UNHCR office in the country. Kenya is already hosting some 300,000 refugees, two-thirds of them from Somalia and most of the rest from Ethiopia.

PANOS MOUMTZIS

ERITREA:
Life at the end of the road

Few vehicles travel the dusty road from Kassala in Sudan to Asmara in Eritrea — an area of once lush savannah, now little more than a vast wasteland. An occasional truck brings refugees back to their villages in Eritrea after many years in camps in Sudan. For the exiles, the semi-desert provides a glimpse of the extent of the drought stalking Africa, and a bleak preview of the life that awaits them at the end of their journey home.

Soil erosion in western Eritrea has been so severe that entire mountains, once lush with vegetation, have become barren. The few remaining trees are stripped of their leaves by stray flocks of goats or camels. Although strictly forbidden by the new Provisional Government of Eritrea, other trees are cut for animal feed and fuel.

Still, some 50,000 people have returned since Eritrea gained *de facto* independence last year after three decades of war. A referendum, probably in the spring of 1993, will most likely result in Eritrea formally separating from Ethiopia.

But the returnees do not worry so much about Eritrea's legal status. To many observers, it is amazing that they have decided to come back at all to a country that seems to be lacking in everything but hope.

Three out of four of the Eritreans are dependent on aid brought in by the World Food Program (WFP). There's enough food to go around, but no one enjoys a surplus. Healthy adults receive food only if they work; in dam construction projects, for example. Everyone is waiting for the summer rains, which the government is anxious to utilize efficiently. The dams could prevent the rain from further eroding the soil in the highlands.

The lowland town of Tesseney, near the border with Sudan, is regarded as a fertile area. In the old days, when Eritrea was an Italian colony, cotton was grown near the riverbed. Today the old cotton factory is used for the registration of returning refugees. Trucks, carrying about 70 people each, stop at the factory. The returnees are then registered by representatives of the Eritrean refugee body, CERA. About 20,000 returnees have chosen to settle in the Tesseney area. They are given a small piece of land and some materials for building huts. Other returnee enclaves have sprung up around Berentu and Akordat, farther down the road toward the new capital, Asmara.

Some 50,000 people have returned since Eritrea gained de facto independence last year after three decades of war.

Issayas Afework is General Secretary of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) and leader of Eritrea. He is disappointed about the lack of funds for the repatriation of at least 250,000 Eritreans from Sudan.

"The appeal from the Provisional Government of Eritrea to the international community, and especially UNHCR, was encouraging in the beginning," Afework said in Asmara. "But when it came to operational plans we were faced with difficulties, which we consider a disappointment. We were told about financial constraints but did not accept the excuse. We know about repatriation programs in South Africa and Namibia which were properly funded by UNHCR."

But following a meeting in late April, the Provisional Government agreed to allow UNHCR to operate with the funds available. UNHCR and the government agreed that a joint, UNDP-led delegation would assess the reintegration needs for Eritrean returnees from Sudan. Karin Landgren, head of UNHCR in Eritrea, says much needs to be done.

"We need money," she said. "We'll need at least $50 million to help 250,000 returnees, but have received less than $5 million from donors. It is very difficult to get the world to focus on needs in Eritrea. The tens of thousands who have already repatriated are straining the capacity of the clinics, wells and schools that exist — as well as the precarious food supply. We want to assist communities now reabsorbing the returnees."

Landgren and other members of the local UNHCR staff have made several missions to border areas where returnees had been arriving in large numbers until news of food shortages reached Eritreans still in Sudan.

Despite the problems, there is still cause for optimism. But the outlook would be much more promising if more funds were available for a larger and more organized repatriation effort. Otherwise, we may be confronted by yet another tragic story from the Horn of Africa.

Torkil Sorensen
Journalist, Danish Refugee Council

HAITI:
No room at the inn

Although the United States has been interdicting boats carrying Haitian asylum seekers for a decade now, and subjecting those aboard to cursory screening, the Bush Administration decided on 24 May 1992 to drop screening entirely and summarily return all Haitians caught by the U.S. Coast Guard.

Since the overthrow of the democratically elected government of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide on 30 September 1991, the Bush Administration's policies towards the Haitian refugees have evolved in fits and starts, influenced by election-year politics, court challenges, and the growing numbers of asylum seekers. On 20 November, after the U.S. Coast Guard forcibly repatriated the first boatload of Haitians since the coup who had been "screened out" for lack of a finding of a "credible fear of return," President George Bush declared, "It is a fair policy." The policy, he said, "does make a distinction between economic refugees and political refugees. But let me assure you, it is not based on some race or double standard."

Barred on occasions by various district court injunctions from returning the Haitians, the Bush Administra-

tion was engaged in a debate in the courts and in Congress from late November through late May as to whether, in fact, the screening was fair. But throughout that period the parameters of the debate were set by Bush's own statement that the policy made a distinction between economic and political refugees. The debate revolved around the adequacy of the screening procedure - whether people were being screened out as economic migrants who, in fact, might have been refugees - not the denial of screening for refugee status altogether.

The parameters of the debate were also set by President Ronald Reagan's Executive Order 12324, which created the Haitian interdiction operation. That order authorized the U.S. Coast Guard to stop and board vessels "of foreign nations with whom we have arrangements," and to "return the vessel and its passengers to the country from which it came, when there is reason to believe that an offense is being committed against the United States immigration laws...**provided that no person who is a refugee will be returned without his consent**."

In the first legal challenge, Haitian Refugee Center v. Baker, Judge C. Clyde Atkins of the U.S. District Court for Southern Florida issued a preliminary injunction that prevented the government from repatriating Haitians until it could show the court how it would "implement and follow procedures... to ensure that Haitians with bona fide political asylum claims are not forced to return to Haiti."

The plaintiffs had charged that because of the flaws in the screening procedures, refugees were being returned to Haiti in violation of the principle of *non-refoulement*. This meant, they maintained, that the United States was violating Article 33 of the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol. Article 33(1) states that no contracting States "shall expel or return ('refouler') a refugee in any manner whatsoever to the frontiers or territories where his life or freedom would be threatened on account of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion."

Depositions taken by the lawyers for the Haitian Refugee Center revealed what lead attorney Ira Kurzban called "shocking... wholly arbitrary procedures" to screen the Haitians for credible asylum claims. Kurzban testified before a Congressional hearing that "INS officers readily admitted that they had interviewed hundreds of Haitians without receiving any information about the political conditions in Haiti. They also candidly acknowledged that they had received no training on interviewing Haitian asylum applicants... This lack of knowledge extended to such issues as not knowing who the President and Prime Minister of Haiti were... Immigration officers were also applying incorrect standards. One officer could not even name all the grounds necessary to obtain asylum."

The U.S. Congress's General Accounting Office studied the records at Guantanamo and found numerous errors. "We found that because of these weaknesses," said the GAO's report, "at least 54 Haitians were apparently mistakenly repatriated." The GAO added that "we believe our numbers may understate the problem."

However, the parameters of the debate began to shift. What had been the central issue - the adequacy and legitimacy of pre-asylum screening - became a side issue. Whether or not the screening and administrative procedures were adequate was irrelevant, contended the Bush Administration. The government argued before the U.S. Supreme Court that "Article 33(1) is simply inapplicable in this case" and staked out a position that it was not bound by Article 33(1) not to forcibly repatriate Haitians determined to be refugees despite their legitimate fears for their lives and freedom. First, said the government, the Protocol was not "self-executing," meaning that unless and until Congress implements the Protocol's provisions in domestic law, the Protocol itself cannot be interpreted as a source of rights. Second, the government maintained that Article 33(1) only applies to refugees "within the territory of a contracting State." Since the Haitians were interdicted in international waters, argued the government, they could not be said to be returned from the United States. In arguing the case before the U.S. Supreme Court, the Bush Administration cited Cassell's French Dictionary's definition of "refouler" as "to expel (aliens)," which, it said, "obviously encompasses only aliens physically present in the territory of the contracting state."

The government argued that since the Haitians were interdicted in international waters, they could not be said to be returned from the United States.

The courts became hogtied by this argument. The Eleventh Circuit Court of Appeals instructed a lower court to "dismiss, on the merits, the claims predicated on Article 33." A dissenting voice on that court, Judge Joseph W. Hatchett, wrote that the case rested on "the government's decision to intercept Haitian refugees on the high seas, in international waters, to prevent them from reaching United States territory...[where] they [would] have the right to insist, in United States courts, that they be accorded proper,

fair, and adequate screening procedures... Having promised the community of nations that it would not turn back refugees at the border, the government yet contends that it may go out into international waters and actively prevent Haitian refugees from reaching the border." Judge Hatchett concluded, "Such a contention makes a sham of our international treaty obligations and domestic laws for the protection of refugees."

UNHCR wrote an amicus brief in the case saying, "Article 33 proscribes the return of refugees 'in any manner whatsoever'...Article 33 identifies the place *to which* no refugee may be sent; no exception is provided that conditions the obligation on the place *from* which a refugee is returned."

The Supreme Court itself let stand the Administration's forced repatriation of the Haitians, declining to consider the case on its merits. Associate Justice Blackmun, the lone dissenting vote, wrote, "A quick glance at the Court's docket reveals not only that we have room to consider these issues, but that they are at least as significant as any we have chosen today. If indeed Haitians are to be returned to an uncertain future in their strife-torn homeland, that ruling should come from this Court, after full and careful consideration of the merits of their claims."

After the Supreme Court declined to hear the case, the government took a series of steps (including holding full asylum hearings for screened-in asylum seekers at Guantanamo Bay where they would not have the benefit of legal counsel) that appeared to further limit the rights of Haitian boat people. Finally, on 24 May, President Bush issued the Executive Order that abrogated President Reagan's earlier Order, which had specified that no refugee should be returned. The new Order, dropping the screening procedure entirely and authorizing the summary return of all interdicted Haitians, resulted in a new legal challenge.

In this case, the argument that the Protocol is not self-executing held sway. Clearly showing his frustration with the decision he felt bound by legal precedent to make, Judge Sterling Johnson wrote, "It is unconscionable that the United States should accede to the Protocol and later claim

U.S. Policy

Following are excerpts from a statement by Ambassador Brunson Mckinley, deputy assistant secretary for refugee programs, to the U.S. House Subcommittees on Western Hemisphere Affairs and International Operations on June 11, 1992:

"On May 24, 1992, President Bush issued an executive order which permits the U.S. Coast Guard to return Haitians picked up at sea directly to Haiti. Since that date, we have picked up and returned to Haiti 2,887 Haitians. In the past week, once information on the new policy became widespread, we have interdicted only about a dozen Haitians. There have been no reports of mistreatment of returnees.

"We faced an excruciating dilemma. Haitians want to come to Miami. To save lives we pick people up at sea. By doing so we strengthen the pull of the magnet for the United States. The magnet goes well beyond political refugees; most are people seeking better economic opportunity.

"Our policy decision to return Haitians picked up on the high seas without screening has raised concern about the consistency of our policy with the legal obligations of the 1951 UN Convention and the 1967 Protocol on the Status of Refugees ... We have not violated the Convention, and we have no intention of lessening our advocacy of its principles around the world. Our position, simply put, is that the UN Refugees Convention does not impose an obligation on a state with respect to refugees outside of its own territory.

"The perception that we are treating Haitians differently than asylum seekers from other nations ... is not true. In fact, we are admitting to the United States large numbers of Haitian asylum seekers.

"Cuban asylum seekers picked up by the Coast Guard are brought to the United States because they are fleeing a repressive, totalitarian regime. This is a longstanding U.S. policy ... Otherwise our policy of interdicting intending illegal immigrants is not discriminatory ... Currently we are picking up and returning small numbers of boat people from the Dominican Republic.

"U.S. policy on Vietnamese boat people has been in place for over ten years ... we continue to oppose involuntary repatriation to Vietnam until conditions change in that country. In addition, the CPA (the Comprehensive Plan of Action involving over 50 nations) states that voluntary repatriation is the appropriate solution. Since over 22,000 persons have returned voluntarily and thousands more are in the queue, we believe involuntary repatriation is unnecessary."

that it is not bound by it. This court is astonished that the United States would return Haitian refugees to the jaws of political persecution, terror, death and uncertainty when it has contracted not to do so. The Government's conduct is particularly hypocritical given its condemnation of other countries who have refused to abide by the principle of *non-refoulement*. As it stands now, Article 33 is a cruel hoax and not worth the paper it is printed on unless Congress enacts legislation implementing its provisions or a higher court reconsiders Bertrand [the precedent case holding that the Protocol is not self-executing]."

Legislation was introduced shortly after Judge Johnson's decision that would clarify the obligations of the United States not to forcibly repatriate refugees outside U.S. territory who are in the custody of the United States. But members of the U.S. Congress are subject to many of the same political pressures as the Administration, and observers doubt that enough votes could be mustered on such legislation to override a Presidential veto.

What are those pressures? As in Western Europe, there appears to be noisy, if not widespread, sentiment that too many foreigners have been allowed to immigrate and that the number of economic migrants claiming to be refugees fleeing persecution is on the upswing. During the fall, when the Haitian crisis was beginning to take shape, anti-immigrant sentiment seemed to be on the rise: President Bush was being challenged within his own party by two candidates, Patrick Buchanan and former Ku Klux Klansman David Duke, who blamed America's social ills on recent immigrants; Bush's Attorney General, running in a special election to fill a vacant Senate seat, was defeated by a Democrat running on the "America First" slogan; Congress failed to enact a foreign aid bill; the Governor of California blamed immigrants for "taxpayer squeeze."

The Haitians had the misfortune to flee during an economic recession and Presidential election campaign, when the economic and social ills of the country were being blamed on foreigners. That they were fleeing the poorest country in the hemisphere blinded many Americans to the widescale political persecution occurring in that country in the wake of the coup. The overwhelming concern was about the social and economic impact of poor immigrants on the United States. Dan Stein, executive director of the anti-immigrant lobby, Federation for American Immigration Reform, said, "We've got another Mariel Boatlift in the making in Haiti. It's almost like *déjà vu*. The similarities between Cuba 1980 and Haiti 1991 are eerie. Along with a handful of legitimate political refugees, is an army of economic migrants waiting to descend on South Florida. We made a mistake in Cuba and we ought not to compound that error by repeating it with Haiti."

Therefore the explanation for the new policy, given by Pentagon spokesman, Navy Commander Greg Hartung, that "there is no room at the inn" directed the issue away from the needs of the refugee in need of shelter towards the comfort of the innkeepers.

The innkeepers, the segment of the American public that worried about the potential impact of a mass exodus of Haitian refugees, showed little appreciation either for the dangers faced by Haitians being hunted down for their political beliefs, or for the implications of this policy on the rest of the world.

UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Sadako Ogata, was in Washington shortly before the new policy was announced. Mrs Ogata told this writer at the time that U.S. policy toward the Haitians "has a very serious implication because it might undermine those who leave countries for very serious repressive causes." She continued, "The way the U.S. deals with the Haitians was taken as a lesson of how, for example, Southeast Asian countries would be dealing with the Viet Nam boat people or any others who might come under similar circumstances."

The new policy conveys an uncompromising message: Stop refugees before they reach your territory and you can do whatever you want with them.

It could mean the end of asylum as we have known it.

Bill Frelick
Senior Policy Analyst
U.S. Committee for Refugees

REPATRIATION OR REFOULEMENT

Since mid-1991, more than 270,000 Myanmar Moslems, called Rohingyas, have sought temporary refuge in Bangladesh.

According to a recent United Nations survey, the refugees report a virtual campaign of violence by the Myanmar military. Gang rape, forced labor, violence, killing, religious persecution and looting make up the litany of their suffering.

Yet, a UN-inspired compact between Bangladesh and Myanmar on 28 April 1992 would organize the repatriation of 5,000 refugees a day, with the entire population to be returned over six months.

An astonishing number of Rohingyas report that rape, in particular, spurred their flight. It shatters the sanctity of the home and the integrity of the victims - particularly in this Moslem culture. According to the UN study, at least one woman or girl in about half of the 170 families interviewed had been raped, and almost all the families could identify specific women who had been raped. On average, a victim was raped on three occasions by 10 different men; at least one woman reported being raped by as many as 80 assailants. Women have often been raped in their homes, but usually are taken to military encampments where the soldiers have unimpeded access to them. In a particularly cruel variation, women have been abducted to their mosque and raped there.

The Myanmar military has also specifically targeted fleeing asylum seekers. According to a UN source, on 14 March 1992, soldiers fired on about 300 asylum seekers en route to Bangladesh. Soldiers apparently shot randomly into the group with machine guns, reportedly killing 10 people. That source also reported that a similar attack occurred on 25 February, but could not determine the number of victims.

This year, we are told, we can expect the voluntary repatriation of a significant proportion - as many as 3 million - of the world's 17 million refugees. It was hoped that the end of the Cold War and the emergence of regional peace processes would herald an end to exile for many refugees. But the "new world order" appears increasingly elusive. Crises in places such as former Yugoslavia, Myanmar, Sudan, Haiti, Liberia and Iraq are causing new displacements. Solutions to the plight of the newly dispossessed are difficult to find.

We thus offer 10 principles to guide refugee repatriation policy. Decision-makers in government, the United Nations and private agencies should not promote repatriation to places like Myanmar until all of these requirements can be satisfied.

I

Repatriation should not be promoted unless all countries involved in the repatriation effort can ensure protection of, and respect for, the basic human rights of the refugees. All nations are bound, either by treaty or by customary international law, to respect and protect fundamental human rights, including those of refugees.

II

Refugees must not be returned to any country where they would face persecution. This right of *non-refoulement* - a refugee's protection against return to a place of persecution - is the foundation for virtually all refugee protection. It is codified in the refugee treaty regime, which bars the return of refugees to countries where their life or freedom would be threatened. It has also achieved the status of customary international law and thus binds all nations, irrespective of accession to treaties. Any plan to repatriate refugees must ensure respect for this fundamental principle.

The right of *non-refoulement* necessarily imposes on all states an obligation to admit people fleeing persecution and to institute fair and reliable processes for determining which asylum seekers are entitled to refugee protection. For example, the United States government's decision to repatriate Haitian boat people was controversial initially because the summary high-seas screening mechanism failed to meet minimum international standards. The recent decision to return

UNHCR/ T. Taylor

Myanmar refugees await registration at a center in Bangladesh's Cox's Bazar District

Haitians without inquiry into their claims of persecution only compounds the violation.

III

Refugee repatriation must be voluntary. This principle is a corollary of the right of *non-refoulement*: presumably, a refugee would genuinely volunteer to return only if he or she would not face persecution upon return. For example, according to reports, during demonstrations staged by the Rohingyas to protest against return, Bangladeshi police fired on protesters, killing at least one asylum seeker. About 20,000 people fled into the jungle to avoid repatriation. These accounts raise serious concerns about the voluntariness of return.

Many factors determine whether a refugee's return is voluntary. Principal among them is the requirement that the decision be made free from either direct or implied coercion. Confinement under onerous conditions may overwhelm the exercise of free will by the refugees. Harsh detention conditions, such as those for Vietnamese in Hong Kong, or for Iraqis in Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey, also undermine the voluntariness of return. For example, at Artewiyah camp in Saudi Arabia, a large population of young men is imprisoned in cages, and violence there is endemic. Facing confinement, frustration and despair, many of these asylum seekers have elected to return home. Their decision, however, seems prompted more by the oppressive conditions in the camp than by any genuine desire to repatriate.

IV

Repatriation should be promoted only if it can be accomplished in a manner that ensures safety and dignity upon return. Human rights law guarantees the fundamental rights of the returnees. The desirability of repatriation as a solution does not outweigh the need to ensure that it is compatible with basic human rights. Surely, in a situation where soldiers have killed those seeking to leave, there are serious concerns that the government will fail to ensure the safety of returnees.

V

UNHCR should be involved in a meaningful way from the inception of the repatriation plan to its conclusion. It must be able to ensure the voluntariness of the repatriations and the safety of the refugees upon their return. A repatriation plan, such as the one proposed for the Rohingyas, which will call upon UNHCR only "if in fact the co-operation and services of UNHCR are indeed necessary," is unlikely to provide adequate protection for returning refugees.

UNHCR has been able in the past to carry out successful large-scale repatriations. The return of 43,000 Namibians in 1989 is one example. UNHCR has also played a useful role in planning and implementing the repatriation of Cambodians. Since 30 March 1992, more than 50,000 refugees have been returned to Cambodia from Thailand. Those refugees who returned to Phnom Penh by train were accompanied by UN guards and doctors and given food and water. They were met at the train station in Phnom

UNHCR D. Bregnard

Unassisted returnees such as these Salvadorians should enjoy the same rights and protections as those who take part in voluntary repatriation programs

Penh and taken to a UNHCR reception center, from where they were dispersed inside Cambodia. While it is too soon to determine whether this program will succeed, the active involvement of UNHCR provides a positive assurance.

VI

NGOs, in addition to UNHCR, should have separate and unimpeded access to refugees, both before and after their return. NGOs are often able to perform functions that UNHCR cannot, due to diplomatic and resource constraints. Independent human rights groups, for example, can report publicly and give assurances to the international community that abuses in the country of origin have ended.

VII

Any repatriation plan should establish that the conflict has abated and its attendant risks have been eliminated before promoting return. In addition to ensuring that repatriations are deferred until the armed conflict has ended, the return plan should guarantee that the risks associated with armed conflict — those which still threaten the lives, safety or dignity of the refugees — have abated.

The issue of land mines, one of the most threatening "attendant risks," is particularly important with the repatriation of Cambodians and the return of Afghans under way. In both countries, the populations have been ravaged by the widespread and indiscriminate use of land mines. Without prior implementation of an effective de-mining program, the danger inherent in repatriation is manifest.

VIII

Repatriation should be promoted only if there is no longer a likelihood of recurrence of the human rights abuses that precipitated flight. Any plan for repatriation thus must link repatriation to respect for fundamental human rights. For example, up to 2,000 Rohingyas per day fled widespread violence in Myanmar. Clearly, repatriation of refugees who have fled similar violence is inappropriate.

IX

Particular emphasis must be placed on the unique protection needs of returning women and children, who are a high-risk group within an already vulnerable population. As the horrific stories recounted by Rohingya women prove, protecting the safety of women is particularly difficult. The physical integrity of all females must be safeguarded, as well as their right to equal treatment.

Children too have particular needs, both in terms of their sustenance and their mental and physical development. The Convention on the Rights of the Child requires that the rights of children at risk - including refugee children - be protected and their development needs satisfied. The Convention's requirements, however, are often neglected. For example, in 1988, more than 10,000 Sudanese children, mostly purported orphaned males, were settled in refugee camps in western Ethiopia. Although they received basic assistance, they were recruited by insurgent forces. Such treatment is inconsistent with the Convention's prohibition against military recruitment of children under 15.

X

These principles and conclusions may apply as well to unassisted repatriations. In these cases, the refugees themselves initiate their return, as Salvadorians did when they returned from Honduras to El Salvador in 1989-90. Providing reintegration assistance to returnees may itself become effective promotion of return. When that is the case, these general principles are equally applicable.

It is difficult to determine at the time of writing whether and how the repatriation of Rohingyas will ultimately proceed. The Lawyers Committee for Human Rights has urged that the return plan be suspended until appropriate protection arrangements can be made. As of July, the plan appears to have been suspended. Although this situation is unusual, it is also symptomatic of larger concerns.

Proper refugee solutions are rarely instantaneous and always require observance of human rights and humanitarian law. Novelty, flexibility and pragmatism are needed in new arrangements. But paramount principles must be observed to ensure that the basic human rights of refugees are fully respected in the search for lasting solutions.

Arthur C. Helton
Director of the Refugee Project
Lawyers Committee for Human Rights

Afraid to go home

Hushidah Bagam, 20, of Marichya Palong refugee camp, heard the news that Myanmar and Bangladesh had signed a repatriation agreement on 28 April 1992. The widow of a young Arabic teacher killed by soldiers, Bagam fled in March to Bangladesh, after she had been raped. She joined some 270,000 refugees fleeing persecution in Myanmar. With Bagam were her 3-year-old daughter, parents, five brothers and three sisters. In a squalid bamboo and corrugated iron longhouse she calls home, Bagam told her story:

"The soldiers came to our village in the middle of the night, firing their guns. The men started to run away. They were afraid of being conscripted for hard labor. That always happens when the soldiers come. Three soldiers barged into our house and shouted: 'Get up, get up.' They ordered everyone out, all except me. And then they took turns on me. I do not know how long they stayed in the house because I fell unconscious after a while. The next thing I knew, my mother was sprinkling water on my face. The soldiers were gone by that time. They took with them all of our possessions. I did not complain to the military camp, which was just nearby. Nothing would be done anyway.

"My family decided to leave. My father was afraid my other sisters would also be raped. Three months earlier, the soldiers killed my husband. They came to our house and ordered him to come out. They said he was a spy for Bangladesh, that he was a foreigner. I told them he was not. He was born in Myanmar. My husband tried to run away, but the soldiers shot and killed him.

"We planned our flight with our neighbors. I still remember the day we left. It was a Friday. The soldiers were there, but they did not bother us. I was afraid. I wasn't sad. There were no good memories of my village. I don't even want to think about it. All I knew was that we were going to Bangladesh. I did not know much about Bangladesh, but they said it was a good country.

"We carried some rice and water and began a two-day walk to the border. There were 70 families in the group. We crossed many hills. Along the way we met a group of soldiers. They asked us where we were going. We told them Bangladesh. They began giving each one of us money - 40 Takas ($1). They said 'use that. Go back to your father's country.'

"We walked until my feet were swollen. Then we stopped at Boli Bazar, rested for two days and then proceeded to the Naf river to cross into Bangladesh. There were many people at the border. They were all waiting to go to Bangladesh.

Our group paid 4,000 Takas ($100) to a boatman to take us to the other side. There were 140 people in the boat. Just before sunset, we arrived at Nhala Bazar in Bangladesh. We stayed there for two nights. Many visitors came and went. The visitors asked many questions. They also took photographs. I was too tired to pay attention to them. And then we were brought to this camp.

"Life here is different from Myanmar. I feel safe here. I am no longer afraid. But since we heard the news of this agreement to take us back to Myanmar, people have begun worrying. They can shoot us but we cannot go back to Myanmar. There is no justice there. If the country is peaceful, and if UNHCR is allowed to operate in Myanmar, then I will go back."

"They can shoot us but we cannot go back to Myanmar. There is no justice there."

GERMANY:
Acceptance only

Vietnamese Tam Le Thanh will never be able to forget Hoyerswerda. In September 1991, Tam arrived in the small industrial town in Saxony seeking asylum. But he found that immigrants were not welcomed in Hoyerswerda, above all by the angry young skinheads who surrounded the refugee hostel and threatened to attack it. Police backed by water canons were called in to protect the building and the frightened immigrants inside.

Finally, on 23 September, the police decided to evacuate the refugees from Hoyerswerda. In the glare of TV camera lights, a disgraceful scenario unfolded. As jeering local residents applauded their departure, Tam and his fellow refugees boarded buses waiting to take them away. As they drove off, stones were thrown. Windows shattered. Tam suffered eye injuries from flying glass.

"I came to Germany to live in peace." This seemingly simple wish, expressed by Saado, the father of a Kurdish family from Lebanon, was not to be. His dream ended in a nightmare.

On the night of 3 October, as millions of Germans celebrated their country's unification, three youths broke into the quarters provided for foreign immigrants in the small Lower Rhine town of Hünxe. The drunken youths threw firebombs into the building. A molotov cocktail burst through the window of the room where Saado's daughters, Seinab and Mokada, were sleeping peacefully. There was no escaping the rapidly spreading flames.

For two long weeks, doctors fought for the life of 8-year-old Seinab. A third of her body was burned, her lungs badly damaged. Today, Seinab is alive, but her injuries will never completely heal. She is scarred for life - mentally and physically. Her sister was spared the cruel disfigurement, but she too will never be able to dispel the horrible memories of that October night.

SHOCKING BRUTALITY

Hoyerswerda and Hünxe represent a wave of violence against foreigners in Germany that is without parallel in its brutality and cruelty. The Federal Criminal Police Office (BKA) registered some 2,400 criminal acts against foreigners last year alone, including 336 arson cases and 249 physical assaults. The actual number of attacks is very much higher. "It must be assumed," said Hagen Saberschinsky, the BKA president, "that a large number of victims do not file complaints through fear of reprisal or due to language difficulties."

Furthermore, the brutality with which these attacks were carried out has shocked the experts. Two people were killed last year in attacks on immigrants, and a number of people

through understanding

were seriously injured. Arson attacks caused millions of marks in damage.

The public perception that neo-Nazi and anti-foreigner activity is confined mainly to the new federal states, is not borne out by the statistics. Three states in the west of the republic, Northrhine Westphalia, Lower Saxony and Baden-Württemberg, are at the top of the list.

NEO-NAZI POSTURING

Who are these people, so full of hatred that they attack their victims in broad daylight and set fire to their homes under cover of darkness? According to the BKA, of the 919 suspects caught, the majority are youths. Many are unemployed. Usually, they are part of the skinhead scene or belong to other radical right-wing groups.

Are the offenders politically motivated? Saberschinsky doubts "that the parading of anti-foreigner slogans and neo-Nazi posturing reflects their real political convictions." Instead, Saberschinsky sees in these youths a "diffuse hostility to foreigners whose cause probably lies in their personal social situation."

There are many explanatory models for the phenomenon of xenophobia. In the wake of the latest rash of attacks, psychologists, sociologists and politicians are all searching for answers. Some see economic problems as the root cause. Others say these young people have lost their sense of direction in an ever-changing society. A few even cite genetic origins. But nearly all agree that one component of xenophobia is fear. "Fear of immigration, fear of the future and our fear that we will perhaps be called on to share our wealth," said Beate Winkler, a federal government planner responsible for foreign immigrants.

PUBLIC REACTION

Winkler is the main initiator of a public awareness campaign to combat hostility to foreign immigrants which is attracting support from various social groups and lobbies. Under the slogan, "Strangers Need Friends," trade unions and employers' federations, private relief organizations and refugee bodies joined forces last November to demonstrate that hostility to foreign immigrants, right-wing extremism, racism and anti-semitism have no place in German society. "We can no longer accept that violence against foreigners, those seeking asylum, and immigrants, is accepted - let alone applauded - by sections of the community," said Heribert Späth, president of a manual labor trade association.

The media also do not wish to stand idly by. Advertising agencies have offered their services free of charge, producing provocative, prime-time TV spots condemning hostility to foreign immigrants. Well-known artists, sports personalities and other prominent figures have offered their

services for a countrywide information campaign under the slogan, "I am a foreigner."

Since last autumn, there is hardly a town in Germany in which a working group has not begun actively campaigning against xenophobia, not a school in which the topic has not been discussed.

DEEP REVULSION

Politicians from all the democratic parties have offered to participate in projects and campaigns. Federal President Richard von Weizsäcker set an example when he visited several accommodation centers for asylum seekers. Bundestag President, Rita Süssmuth, on behalf of the German Bundestag, expressed her solidarity "with the targets of these attacks and those shielding them... We parliamentarians will not permit a small minority to meet those who come to us as refugees, placing their trust in our rule of law, with hatred and hostility."

The reaction of the German people demonstrates their deep-seated revulsion toward not only those who carried out the attacks, but also those who looked on with covert or even open approval.

But there is no guarantee that the campaign against xenophobia and hatred will be a success. Psychoanalyst Werner Bohleber believes that emotionally charged xenophobia cannot be cured by counter-emotion. "Acceptance will only be achieved through understanding," Bohleber said.

POLITICAL FOOTBALL

In other words, those who wish to combat hostility toward immigrants must take existing fears seriously and not exploit them. This challenge is addressed primarily to politicians. Beate Winkler knows from experience that "immigration policy in particular was, and is, very often a political football tossed about by short-term strategies when needed, particularly in the run-up to elections, and misused simply as an emotional means of drumming up votes."

Conclusive, future-oriented concepts in immigrant and refugee policy continue to remain the exception. The immigration debate is becoming a facade behind which real and growing social and economic problems are left unresolved.

Lawmakers attempting to lessen the impact of the momentous international changes of the past few years are becoming bogged down in legalisms. But it is not enough to discuss this global challenge in legal terms alone. If the current trend continues, failure is virtually pre-programmed and the consequences predictable: the local population will see its fears confirmed. Public acceptance of refugees will continue to decrease, with a corresponding erosion of confidence in politicians and political institutions.

The reaction of the German people demonstrates their deep-seated revulsion toward not only those who carried out the attacks, but also those who looked on with covert or even open approval.

RADICALISM ON THE RISE

The signs are already there. In the first four months of this year, some 750 criminal acts against foreign immigrants were recorded in Germany. In several local elections, radical right-wing parties flaunting anti-foreigner slogans secured a considerable proportion of the votes — particularly in those communities which feel threatened by social decline. Not to take the fears of these people seriously is to contribute to the advance of hostility towards immigrants. To suggest to them, however, that a restrictive immigration policy is an appropriate and proven means of relieving them of their fears, virtually amounts to the same thing.

The view that immigration is an "economic and cultural investment in the future" - a concept put forward by well-known German political scientist Claus Leggewie - is met with considerable scepticism in Germany.

But hard statistics tend to support this view. According to a German economic institute, the arrival of 3.5 million political refugees, immigrants and other foreign nationals between 1988-91 cost German taxpayers a total of DM 16 billion. This was offset, however, by immigrant-generated revenues for the German Treasury and Social Services amounting to DM 57 billion. The bottom line, therefore, is that the public purse is showing a net profit of DM 41 billion.

It is true that economic arguments have no place when it comes to taking in refugees who need and deserve protection. And it is doubtful whether rational argument will impress those who harbor resentment, fear or hatred for foreigners.

HARD CHOICES AHEAD

Politicians are faced with a dilemma. There are no simple solutions for one of the most urgent challenges facing us. Nevertheless, the difficult and conflict-strewn path to a comprehensive refugee, immigration and integration policy will have to be taken. If not, the internal freedoms of a democratically constituted state are at risk.

Nine months after the arson attack in Hünxe, the three accused were given youth detention sentences ranging from 3 1/2 to five years. In his summary, the judge spoke of a "malicious act of terrorism." There can be "no accepting, that, on political grounds, firebombs are thrown at homes for refugees. This would mean the end of our rule of law and civilization."

STEFAN TELÖKEN

Uniting lost families

Makae Hussein Hassan thought she had seen it all. The 28-year-old Somali has survived civil war, drought and famine. But nothing matched the tragedy that befell her the day she decided to leave her home and seek sanctuary in Kenya.

With her five children and husband, Makae began to walk east toward Kenya. With them were Makae's in-laws, a family of nomadic camel traders. Her husband, Hassan, had just gone to scout the road when bandits attacked, killing Hassan's father and brothers and stealing their camels. An enraged Hassan went after the bandits, who shot and killed him.

Makae was left alone with the children — all boys. They walked 100 kilometers to the border and virtually collapsed into the arms of UNHCR field worker Marianne Scharnberg at the refugee camp in Liboi.

Makae was hospitalized at the Medecins Sans Frontieres facility in the camp. She was suffering from malaria and diarrhea and was fed intravenously. The children were placed in a tent outside.

"I felt drawn to Makae," said Scharnberg, of Aarhus, Denmark. "She had obviously suffered terribly, but she still had this inner beauty... It's hard to describe."

Scharnberg said Makae spoke a Somali dialect that few in the camp understood.

"After four or five days she appeared to be getting better physically, but mentally she had given up. She wanted to die."

Makae tore out the dextrose tube stuck in her arm, and had to be sedated.

Then another group of refugees arrived in Liboi from the same area in Somalia where Makae's family grazed their camels. Scharnberg was told Makae had a sister who was also making her way to the border.

"I had them write a couple of sentences on paper and I learned how to pronounce the words," Scharnberg said. She took Makae's eldest boy, Hassan, 12, and drove 18 kilometers to the border, where about 4,000 refugees were waiting to cross.

UNHCR/M. Keats

Scharnberg holds Makae: everyone is crying

Scharnberg walked through the crowds of refugees, calling out the words in Somali she had learned: "Makae, I want the sister of Makae. Her name is Hararo. Is Hararo here?"

"They say miracles only happen in the Bible," Scharnberg said. "But after shouting for about 10 minutes, a woman suddenly emerged from the crowd."

"I am the sister of Makae," the woman said.

Hararo was with her husband and five children, one only six months old. Scharnberg drove Hararo and the infant to Liboi and returned later for the others.

"It was a very emotional scene when I took Hararo and her baby to Makae's bedside," Scharnberg said. "I said, 'Look, Makae, here is your sister. Her family is coming soon. You have a family again. You must live. Please don't die."

Scharnberg's pleas were translated and Makae and Hararo hugged each other.

"Everyone was crying, me, everyone," Scharnberg recalls.

This happened in March. Makae is now recovering well. Soon she and her family will be moved to Ifo camp until they can return to Somalia.

Scharnberg, who was seconded to UNHCR from the Danish Refugee Council, feels satisfied at helping Makae.

"I did feel pretty good. You could say it made my day."

Michael Keats

Mercy missions under siege

Médecins Sans Frontières began operations in Yugoslavia one year ago, just as the post-Cold War euphoria was abruptly interrupted by a humanitarian nightmare in the heart of Europe.

The country was breaking up. Violence, often ethnically inspired, was causing extreme suffering. In Slovenia, then Croatia, and now Bosnia-Herzegovina, thousands were being forced out of their homes or trapped in besieged cities without enough food, water or health care.

Yugoslavia's descent into bloody and brutal civil war found the international community unprepared for the reality of a European conflict. Even MSF, the pan-European agency which concentrates on disasters, conflict and refugee needs, was surprised by such sudden violence so close to home. MSF has six country sections and three affiliated offices which supply hundreds of staff every year for crisis operations worldwide.

Despite the daunting task, MSF, United Nations agencies and the International Committee of the Red Cross were determined to bring relief under neutrality and universal mandates to protect victims of war. MSF's Zagreb and Belgrade offices, for example, coordinated delivery of 65 tons of medical supplies to Dubrovnic and other troubled Croatian towns.

But the perverted logic and tactics of this tragic war often seem stronger than any humanitarian principles. Late last year, an MSF team took part in a convoy organized by the European Community and local Croatian authorities to go into the town of Vukovar, which was destined to be overrun by the federal army and Serbian militias.

From the start, the convoy was accused by warring factions of being more political than humanitarian. The combatants for once united to block the convoy. Serbs barred food supplies into the town they were shelling; Croatians refused to open defense lines.

In this climate of fear, MSF set out on a less ambitious task: evacuating the wounded from Vukovar hospital. After long negotiations with all sides, MSF obtained written guarantees of a ceasefire and the right to cross battle lines. The operation illustrated just how difficult it had become to provide humanitarian aid in the former Yugoslav states.

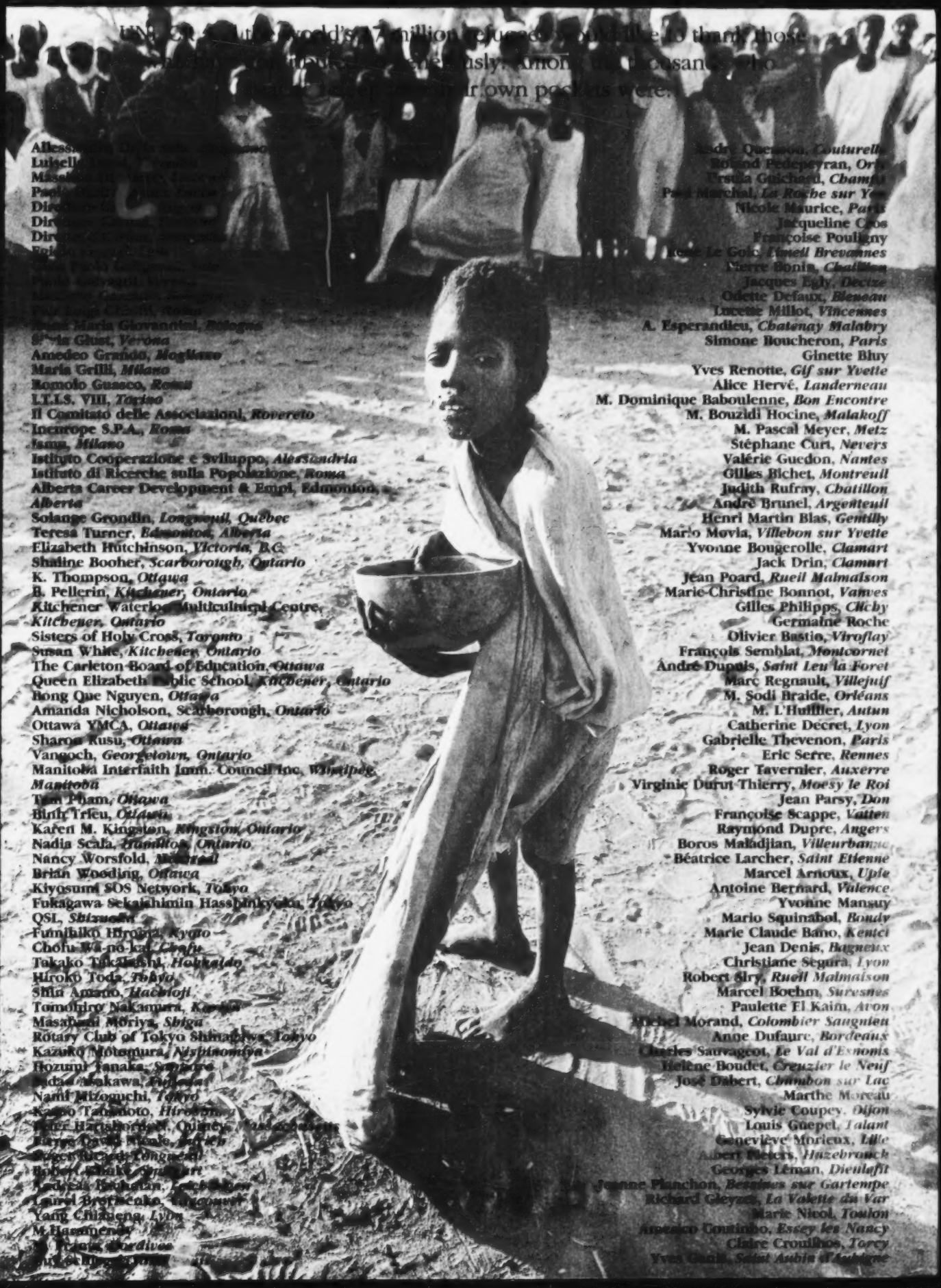
The convoy was frequently caught in the crossfire. After getting out of Vukovar with 109 severely wounded people, one truck hit a mine, wounding four MSF team members and a driver. The convoy drove 24 hours across the country in pouring rain before finally reaching the MSF base camp at Vinkovky where the wounded were treated.

MSF is now focusing operations on Bosnia-Herzegovina. So far this year, MSF has provided hospitals in Sarajevo, Mostar and other cities with 150 tons of medical supplies, mainly financed by the EC and the Dutch government. Good cooperation with UNHCR ensures a coordinated approach, and even when UNHCR, ICRC and MSF were temporarily forced to withdraw international staff from Bosnia-Herzegovina, MSF national staff continued to supply medicines to Sarajevo hospitals.

But always there is the threat of brutal violence against humanitarian actions: convoys hijacked, hospitals hit, aid workers wounded or killed. In Sarajevo, even minimum humanitarian standards for protecting the population and easing their suffering seemed beyond reach.

The international community cannot stand idly by, not if it truly supports the universality of human rights and humanitarian principles. Only by firm determination can the repetition of past massacres be prevented. Vukovar became a symbol; Saravejo, Mostar and other cities must not follow that horrific example.

Jacques de Milliamo
Director, MSF Holland,
Member, MSF International Council



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Losing your country doesn't mean losing your skills.

Like many refugees, they were all she had left. Fortunately, some things can't be taken away at the border.

Exile is the last resort for many victims of persecution and violence. Most hope that, one day, they may be able to go home. Or, at least, be able to contribute again, wherever else they may be.

UNHCR is there to help them. Your attitude can be the difference between hope and despair.

We need your help to help refugees.

UNHCR ACTION
P.O. Box 2500 CH - 1211 Geneva 2 Switzerland

UNHCR
United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees